System

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‘The rules are in my head.’
Rei Kawakubo

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Table of contents

36 In the words of... Rei Kawakubo.
By Hans Ulrich Obrist. Illustration by François Berthoud. Photographs by Juergen Teller.

56 Face à face. Diptyque.
By Gaia Repossi & Jeremy Everett.

58 A letter from... São Paolo: Forty million princesses.
By Flávio Rocha. Illustration by François Berthoud.

60 A letter from... Beijing: Size matters.
By Hung Huang. Illustration by François Berthoud.

62 A letter from... New York: Clothes maketh the woman.
By Leandra Medine. Illustration by François Berthoud.

64 First look. Paco Rabanne by Julien Dossena.
By Jonathan Wingfield. Photographs by Patrick Demarchelier.

72 The modern. Joe Einhorn.
By Jonathan Wingfield. Portrait by Jason Schmidt.

86 The legendary... Lynn Wyatt.
By Jerry Stafford. Photographs by Robert Polidori.

108 Retrospective. Charles James.
By William Middleton. Photographs by Robert Polidori.

132 The decisive moment. Melanie Ward.
By Jo-Ann Furniss. Styling by Melanie Ward. Portrait by Daniel Jackson. Photographs by Glen Luchford.

154 Portfolio. Bruce Weber.
Curated by Dennis Freedman.

178 The good life. John Casablancas.
By Hubert Woroniecki.

188 Carlyne's edit. Jeremy Scott.
Photographs & styling by Carlyne Cerf de Dudzeele.

192 The beauty spot. Véronique Gabai-Pinsky.
By Martin Brandtner. Portrait by Brigitte Lacombe.

200 Chronicles of chic. Victor Skrebneski.
By Alex Aubry.

218 The American Questionnaire. Diane von Furstenberg.
By Loïc Prigent.

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Erwin Wurm, *One-Minute Sculpture*, 1997

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The Standard

Alex Aubry has lived in Chicago for the past 20 years. He is an architect, editor, writer, marketing director, educator and curator. He is currently completing a second book looking at emerging costume collectors in the Arabian Gulf Region.

François Berthoud spent his early years in a mountainous area of Switzerland. He makes images and illustrations mostly for fashion magazines and brands. It's been and still is lots of fun. For any more information, Google him!

Jeremy Everett spent much of his childhood exploring the American West. He is now a visual artist based between New York and Paris. He has lived out of a suitcase for the last three years travelling and producing work.

Dennis Freedman grew up in the 1950s in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and is now the creative director of Barneys. He was a regular at Studio 54, but he'd generally return home by 1.00 am to eat a pint of ice cream and watch back-to-back reruns of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

Jo-Ann Furniss grew up in Manchester. She is a consultant, writer and editor. She doesn't have a kitchen at home, as she'd much rather have a television.

Hung Huang is from Beijing. She writes and loves to cook. She will play a Manchu princess who hates her daughter's boyfriend in an up-coming Sony Pictures film about 1920s Shanghai.

Leandra Medine is from New York. She writes a fashion blog called *The Man Repeller*. In an elementary school production of *Bible House Rocks,* she played a dancing sunflower.

William Middleton is originally from Kansas – think lots of big, flat wheat fields. He is a magazine journalist and editor. For much of the past decade, he's been researching and writing the first biography of Dominique and John de Menil and moved from New York to Houston to work on it.

Hans Ulrich Obrist is from Zürich. He is a curator, writer and co-director of London's Serpentine Gallery. The first exhibition he curated was in his mum and dad's kitchen.

Robert Polidori was born in Montréal. He makes photographic iconography of phenomena he finds interesting, but before he wanted to make movies – photography was much cheaper to practice. His mother can trace her French-Canadian lineage all the way back to 1554, a good 66 years before the first British settlements in North America.

Loïc Prigent is from Brittany. He makes fashion documentaries. Diane Von Furstenberg asked him to film her doing the wildest positions of yoga or pilates; he can't remember the technical name of this torture. After an intense workout, she looked amazing. She doesn't sweat!

Gaia Repossi was born in Torino in northern Italy. She is the artistic director of Repossi, which was founded by her great-grandfather. She is responsible for developing the collections and enjoys creating imaginary paintings every day.

Flávio Rocha is from Natal, Brazil. He is the CEO of Riachuelo. In 1994, he ran for President.

Jason Schmidt is from New York. He's a photographer. He says that being a photographer is a great excuse to get invited into people's lives for a little bit and that is the best thing.

Jerry Stafford was brought up in Bromley in South London. He is a writer, stylist and the creative director of French film production company Première Heure. His last holiday was spent birdwatching in the Galapagos Islands.

Juergen Teller is from Erlangen, Germany. He is a photographer. He is always sleep-deprived.

Hubert Woroniecki is from Paris. He makes (or tries to make) films and videos. He left the wonderful world of supermodels in New York at the end of the 1990s to become a student in a film school in Poland and sleep in a dorm with three other guys.

Before anything, James wanted to finish his architecture book

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Chloé

For a magazine in search of long and meaningful dialogues, it was always going to be a tall order to imagine Rei Kawakubo as our lead interview.

What *were* we thinking?

Well, for this second issue of *System,* we were drawn to those people who reside in their own unique world: places rich with identity and character that can't - or won't - fit into the increasingly homogenous confines of fashion.

Whether that's Bruce Weber's American utopia, Melanie Ward's attitudinal styling or the fabulous life of a Texan philanthropist, we've gone in search of conviction and integrity. These individuals aren't marginal or rebels; they're simply individuals. And the individual, it seems, is at odds with the powerful tide sweeping fashion further towards global industry.

Which brings us to Rei Kawakubo.

Over a series of conversations and exchanges, we were given some rare insight into her life and work at Comme des Garçons. Hers is a world in which the past has no place, and in which she continues to go to extraordinary lengths to create something radically new every six months. Even when, as she admits, that cannot be achieved.

Ultimately, whether we enjoy the results or not, Kawakubo, like many of this issue's individuals, makes fashion a smarter, riskier and more unexpected place.

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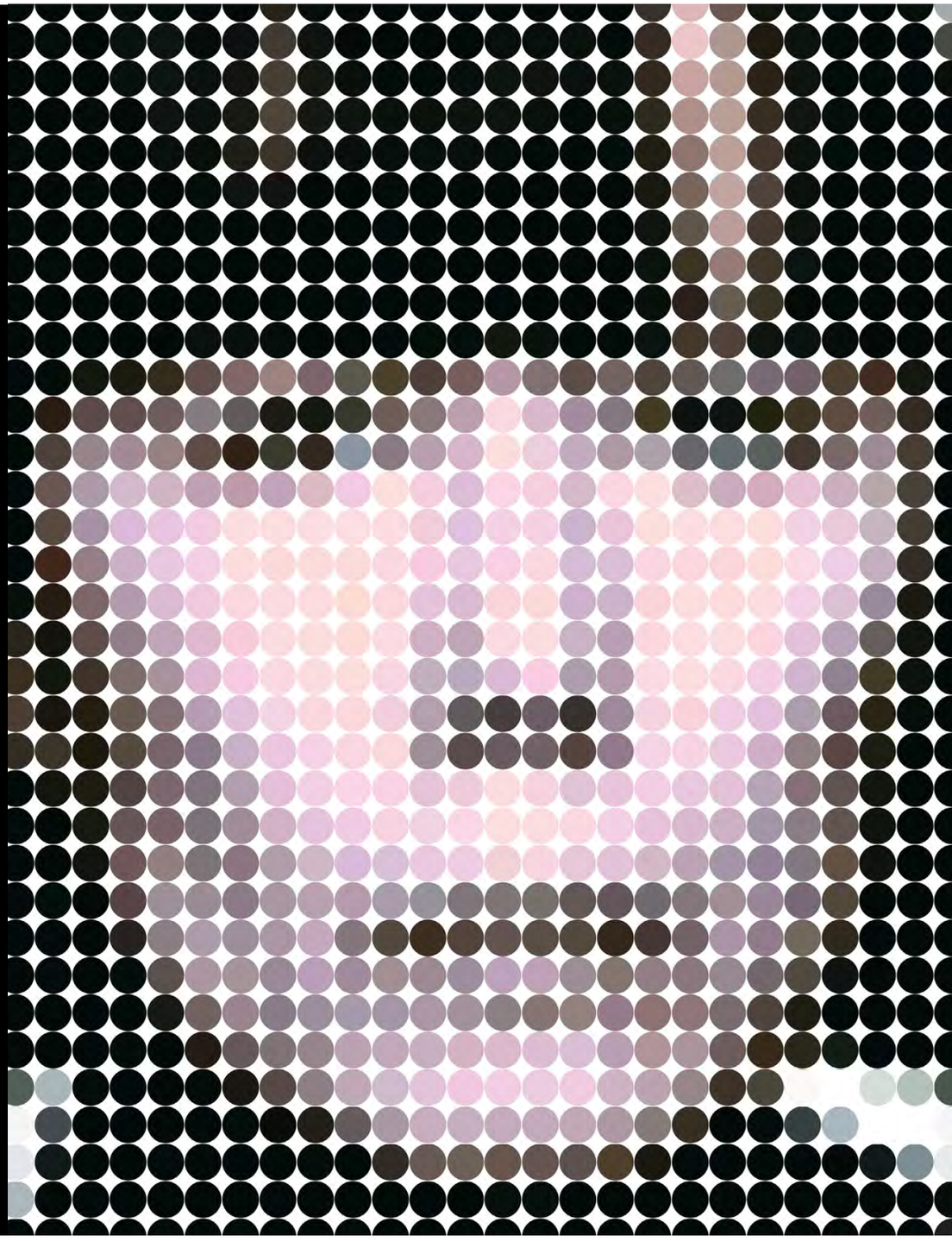
In the words of…

‘The rules are in my head.’

Rei Kawakubo’s quiet revolution just got louder.

By Hans Ulrich Obrist
Illustration by François Berthoud



Going around museums and galleries, seeing films, talking to people, seeing new shops, looking at silly magazines, taking an interest in the activities of people in the street, looking at art, travelling: all these things are not useful, all these things do not help me, do not give me any direct stimulation to help my search for something new. And neither does fashion history. The reason for that is that all these things above already exist.

I only can wait for the chance for something completely new to be born within myself.

The way I go about looking for this from within is to start with a provisional 'theme'. I make an abstract image in my head. I think paradoxically (oppositely) about patterns I have used before. I put parts of patterns where they don't usually go. I break the idea of 'clothes'. I think about using for everything what one would normally use for one thing. Give myself limitations. I pursue a situation where I am not free. I think about a world of only the tiniest narrowest possibilities. I close myself. I think that everything about the way of making clothes hitherto is no good. This is the rule I always give myself: that nothing new can come from a situation that involves being free or that doesn't involve suffering.

In order to make this SS14 collection, I wanted to change the usual route within my head. I tried to look at everything I look at in a different way. I thought a way to do this was to start out with the intention of not even trying to make clothes. I tried to think and feel and see as if I wasn't making clothes.

Rei Kawakubo, October 2013

For a house that's gleefully operated on the margins of the fashion industry for 40 years, Comme des Garçons' Spring/Summer 2014 collection was unconventional – even by Rei Kawakubo's standards. Commenting backstage, the 71-year-old Japanese designer referred to the 23 looks as 'anything but clothes'. She wasn't lying. To label these sculptural *objets* mere clothes would be to align them with the many hundreds of collections the fashion industry spews out each season. For them not to be different would have meant Kawakubo had failed. The rapturous applause at the end of the show proved otherwise.

Since showing her first collection in Paris in 1981, the industry's press and buyers have become accustomed to Kawakubo's regular and radical expressions of sheer *otherness*. Nothing, however, can prepare you for what's next. That's the whole point.

From 'body-bump' dresses ('Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body', Spring/Summer 1997) to mummified wedding gowns ('White Drama', Spring/Summer 2012), it comes as no surprise to discover Kawakubo is driven by a wanton – even stubborn – desire to create something new, something that further pushes the boundaries of what can be accepted as fashion.

Some of her premonitions have since become industry standards (guerrilla stores, artist collaborations…), while others (the tarmac, kerosene and smoke scented *anti*-fragrance), it's safe to say, probably never will.

The voice of the designer has never been so important in disseminating brand values. Cynically put, he (or she) who shouts the loudest, gets heard the most. Yet whilst Kawakubo's refusal to explain herself has often frustrated her public, her silence has given her voice more power and resonance than any fashion designer in the industry today.

The following conversation took place on Sunday, 29th September, between Hans Ulrich Obrist – himself an eminent curator and commentator operating in the art world – and Rei Kawakubo. The designer's husband and Comme des Garçons CEO Adrian Joffe acted as interpreter. The conversation then continued over a series of email exchanges, culminating in Rei Kawakubo's beautifully articulate statement that you can read on the previous page.

'This is the rule I always give myself: that nothing new can come from a situation that involves being free or that doesn't involve suffering.'

HUO: Hello, it's a real honour to meet you. I'd like to start right away with my first question.
Adrian Joffe: Rei's not a typical designer who is able to answer questions in an easy way. [*To Rei*] Hans sometimes interviews artists like Gerhard Richter.

I have a very nice story to start with. Many years ago, I went to see the great philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer [1] – he was a student of Heidegger, Germany's oldest and most legendary philosopher. At a certain moment during the interview, Gadamer fell asleep. After 15 minutes, the telephone rang – he picked it up and realised what had happened. The tape recorder was still running, so he looked at me and said, 'You will have great problems in transcribing my silence.'

For the last four or five years, I've been working on Metabolism; I don't know if you know the book that Rem Koolhaas and I made on Metabolism and Metabolist architects, Kikutake, Maki and Kurokawa[2] ? [*Project Japan. Metabolism Talks…* by Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist is published by Taschen.] It was an amazing period of time in Japan; there was experimental music, Gutai[3], Metabolism… You started in the late 1960s in this environment, and I was wondering how that environment inspired you?
Rei thinks there's no relation. She started her career in 1969.

What inspired you when you first started? Did you have any heroes or inspirations?
Everybody has… Rei wanted to start working. It was the beginning of her career, and she decided to create her company, Comme des Garçons. There were no particular heroes or influences. She just wanted to make her own living. For her, it was just that she started working.

But was there sort of an epiphany? The other day, I was with a dear friend of mine, Kazuyo Sejima[4] – we've made a lot of projects together. She was telling me that when she was a little girl, she saw a little photo of Sky House by Kikutake[5] in a magazine at her family home. She cited that as a kind of epiphany: 'I want to become an architect.' I was wondering whether you had a similar experience or trigger?

That totally does not exist for her. She wishes she had a story like that, but she doesn't.

It just started somewhere?
It just started. It was only because she wanted to work and be independent and make a living.

To be free.
Yes, to be free. There was a little lack of experience of growing up. You know the story right? She was a stylist at a magazine; she couldn't find anything that she liked to photograph, so instead she decided to make it herself which is when she created her own company. There was no epiphany. She wishes she had one for you, but she doesn't.

I was curious because artists in my field, in the art field, usually have a *catalogue raisonné*, a comprehensive catalogue of all their work – including their earliest student works. It's usually in this first artwork they find their own language. Which would you say was the work, piece or dress where you found your language?
It started with what she calls *kachikan* (which means a sense of values in Japanese) – which is what we call the language of Comme des Garçons. There wasn't one point. As people grow and develop – the language grows and develops. It started with one language, and just like any *ningen* (human being in Japanese), it grew and evolved at each stage. She thinks this is probably the same with everybody. She doesn't think she's special in having a language that developed along the way.

It becomes more complex.
Sometimes it becomes more simple.

When you were saying that there was no epiphany, it sounded like it could have been an accident. In a previous interview, you said that there was a feeling of synergy and accident. That's interesting because it sounds a lot like John Cage [6] and also the idea of embracing chance. I was curious about whether you could talk a little bit about that.
She said an accident is not something you preview, it's just something that happens. It's a matter of being open to it. It's not something that you can plan for. She doesn't know how to elucidate.

Was music important to you? Or John Cage?
Nothing for her. She doesn't know these people. She knows who John Cage is, but she doesn't know anything about him. She knows a little bit about him from when she worked with Merce Cunningham.

That's obviously what interests me the most, the collaborations with artists and the art world. How did that start? Who was the first artist that you collaborated with?
She thinks that began when she created *Six* magazine in the early 1980s. The idea was to communicate the values of Comme des Garçons through *Six,* and that was the point where she started to collaborate with various artists. Do you remember *Six*?

Yes, of course. I love *Six*. Could you give a few examples of artists that you have been particularly fond of collaborating with?
It's not a case of liking, it's a matter of the end result of the work being good.

Recently, it was the photographer René Burri, my compatriot because I'm also Swiss. What attracted you to Burri? He's obviously a great Magnum photographer…
What was the experience like?

Yes. What inspired you about him? He wrote a beautiful text about the collaboration, so I was curious.
Each year we work with one artist. That year we wanted to work with a photographer and she just… [*To Re*i] Can you remember? There was a choice of two photographers, René and one more person. She says she told René this and he didn't mind – he knew the other photographer, and he lived nearby to René. [*To Re*i] What's his name? They were her two favourite photographers. They met and got on. He sent her all his books, but of course she knew his work well.

Do you collect books?
No. She doesn't collect anything.

I met Azzedine Alaïa, and he has a whole hanger – it's giant – full of stuff! It has his own archive but also the archives of other designers, books, art, objects. Do you have an archive?
No, she says she doesn't like anything like that.

No possessions?

'They're a burden. I have no desire for possessions… I've never wanted to collect anything for as long as I can remember.'

For her, they're a burden. She says she has no desire for possessions. She doesn't know why, but she's never wanted to collect anything for as long as she can remember.

Last month I saw the Met exhibition in New York about punk – punk attitude and aesthetics. I was wondering if you saw it, and how you connect with punk – both now and before? Do you feel comfortable with this notion or label?
She likes the punk spirit. She's always liked the spirit in the sense that it's against the run of the mill, the normal way of doing things. That's why she's always felt an affinity with the punk spirit. She likes that word. Every collection is that. Punk is against flattery, and that's what she likes about punk.

So, is it a form of resistance?
Yes, it could be taken like that. Against the flattery, against the normal.

There's an artist who says we can only understand someone if we know what kind of music he or she is listening to. What kind of music do you listen to?
No music.

Silence.
Nothing in particular. All or nothing. What she likes to listen to when she has the choice to listen to something is jazz. She's never said that to me before.

What about dreams? What is your dream of happiness?
She says she doesn't need dreams.

How interesting. A few years ago I spent quite a lot of time with Kazuo Ohno [7] – the dancer – I don't know if you knew him?
No.

He was a famous Butoh dancer – he died at 103 years old. I interviewed him, and he didn't say much except a few very wild things. He never stopped dancing until he was 101 years old. Do you see yourself working in fashion for the rest of your life – even if you get to 100 years old like Kazuo Ohno?
She thinks that work is a life thing though she doesn't know what that work will be. Work is work. She can't imagine retiring.

You once said that you wanted to wake people up…
If people don't wake up there can be nothing new, and therefore there can be no progress.

One thing that stands out for me in almost all the interviews I've read with you is this idea of the new. It's never about repeating but always finding something new. That's very much like that Gerhard Richter does with painting. He finds new rules for the game. This obviously becomes increasingly difficult. Already, when I was a student in the 1980s – there was this feeling with the 1980s postmodernism that everything had been done, that everything was a quote. Rei, you have masterfully always created these new collections. Is there a recipe for how you manage to succeed so successfully and in such an incredible way to create the new?
She'd like to ask you what the recipe is because she struggles every time to find something new. She will not say how she finds something new, but if you have a recipe for how, please tell her, she'd like to know it.

No, I have never found any one recipe – insomnia? I don't know if that's good advice.
She's going to think about that. Maybe she won't sleep for the next collection.

I wanted to know about the new collection – its full of amazing masterpieces. It's so architectural, like buildings. I was so impressed by it, so many congratulations. It's almost like architecture. I was wondering if there was a link and whether you would agree with that?
For this collection, her starting point was not wanting to make clothes. If you say it's architecture, it could be the right thing to say, because it's not clothes. As you said, it gets harder and harder to create something new. She says she struggles every time, you can imagine the hell she goes through. If it's taken as anything but clothes, then you know.

I read the manifesto for the guerrilla stores – they're almost like rules of the game. Do you have rules?
There are different rules each time, but each time there has to be a rule so that she can react with the rules to find something new.

Can you tell me what the rule for the Autumn/Winter 2012 'Flat Collection' [8] was? That collection has been

'I've always felt an affinity with the punk spirit. I like that word. Every collection is that. Punk is against flattery, and that's what I like about it.'

so influential, and many artists in my field have mentioned that they were inspired by it. It's also reverberated through all the fashion collections and into art.
For that collection, the rule was to ignore the human body. The human body is three-dimensional, so she worked totally on the flat two-dimensional plane to try to find something new which ignored the body.

So, it's going from the 3-D to 2-D. What would you say are some other rules which you have used that were particularly memorable? Many people with whom I've talked – artists, designers, architects – have mentioned the 'Bump Dress'[9], which was a great invention. What was the rule of the game there? What prompted the 'Bump Dress'?
At that point, the rule was that she thought she couldn't do new clothes, so she did new bodies. In order to make new clothes she made bodies. Not new bodies, but body shapes.

You formed them.
She formed the body shapes. And then put the thing around it, and that became the clothes.

That's so sculptural.
Don't design clothes, design bodies.

Can you give some other examples? I'm very fascinated with rules of the game. How about the 1981 'Lace Collection'?
Of course, every time there is one. She said she can't think of another particular example now but that the way of finding that thing each time is almost to bully herself, to give herself constraints and regulations. There is always one rule, the *kachikan* of Comme des Garçons and then there are themes, subthemes and interlinking plots.

That's so fascinating. There's an entire French literary movement which began in the 1960s called *Oulipo*[10] – the most famous man from that movement was Georges Perec, and he said the same thing about poetry. He said that we can only create poetry if we set very strong, even brutal constraints.
The same.

He wrote an entire novel without the letter 'e'! I wonder if this idea of constraints also applies to your other inventions like scents, for example *Odeur 53*?
Rei says that making perfume is nothing like making a collection. With every perfume, she makes something new – a new smell, new ingredients, new ideas for packaging. With *Odeur 53*, we just had the idea to make an 'anti-perfume' with no natural ingredients, just with smells from daily life recreated by headspace technology in a very large commercial 200 ml bottle.

It took a long time between the invention of television and the creation of great art with television. It's not immediate. It's similar with the internet – the creation of the internet has not yet meant that great art or fashion has been created with it. I'm interested by your choice to not use the internet for a long time. Has the internet changed your working practice in anyway?
Something about internet is very different to the human mind. The human element is missing between fashion creation and the internet. That's why she's not interested in it. She thinks it can't be translated. She doesn't know whether it will take time before it happens, but at the moment she doesn't think it's happening or if it will ever happen.

The human connection is missing. Many of my friends in art and architecture are concerned that writing and drawing are disappearing. I read in books that text and drawing don't play a big role anymore, what do you think of this? What role do writing and drawing play in your working practice?
She doesn't draw.

Do you write? Or is it all spoken?
If anything, it's with words. Or, *a* word.

Written and spoken?
Yes.

So, are the rules written down?
The rules are not written down. The rules are in her head. She doesn't write them down.

John Waters has of course written a lot about you. So when I was preparing for this interview, I revisited his notes, and he told me that travelling may be your most important inspiration – not collecting, art, literature, music but travelling. Could you talk a little about travel and how that influences your work? Was the recent collection inspired by a trip?
She's afraid to say there's no connection.

'The human element is missing between fashion creation and the internet. That's why I'm not interested in it. I think it can't be translated.'

She hasn't travelled for about four years. She visited Romania and Yemen ten years ago. Recently there hasn't been much travel, and even if she travels, she says it's just as difficult to find something else. You can't get away from yourself.

So, there were no trips.
No, no trips. She's been too busy: too much work. It's inside her.

How does a normal day look?
It's just constant work. She gets there early, stays late and just works. She also runs the company. She helps design the space. She does everything. She checks every single detail about everything for the company. So every day is taken up from morning to night with details, thought and work.

Earlier we spoke about *Six* magazine. What prompted the idea of doing a magazine, and is it something you're still interested in?
She wanted to express and communicate the values of the company in a different, subsidiary way, not only through clothes. That's how it started. Since then, there have been other means but it may return.

Different magazines?
Different magazines, like the yearly thing that comes out now.

And what's down the road? The stores are also part of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. John Waters writes that the 'shops are like a medium designed by Rei…' He mentions the West 2nd St boutique, but I go to Dover Street Market in London all the time – I'm very passionate about Dover Street Market. I think it's the best shop in London. It's also an extension of what you do.
That's a very important part of communicating our values. She does all the stores.

And what's the idea with these guerrilla stores? That's something which is very common now.
We stopped doing them now because everyone is doing them.

Yes I know, but you anticipated them. How did the idea come about?
Even in business, we need to find creative ways to do business. This was almost like a no-brainer. We had the stock, and we had these spaces with students who had nothing to do with fashion but wanted to work. So we moved the stock from our warehouse to those spaces. It was just a business idea to do business in a new way.

'I haven't travelled for about four years. Even if I travel, it's just as difficult to find something else. You can't get away from yourself.'

But that's important. In art, one talks about the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art: the artist does everything. I'm fascinated by that. I have the feeling that with you, it's similar – every piece of paper, every item of stationery, every advertisement…
Advertising, interiors, decoration – everything.

So, there's no hierarchy in that? Can one say that everything is important?
As you said, it's a very difficult task, but she says it's the only way she knows how to work. It's very hard to have a hierarchy because for her everything is important; she sees and controls the running of the visual creation of the company in every way.

And that all comes out of your mind – out of your ideas? I was curious to see how political and historical events have entered that process; you say it all comes from the inside, but how have you been affected by external events – like Fukushima or other big historic events in the world. Have they had an impact or not?
She's not *un*affected by events. It's strange in a way that nothing is directly influenced. It's like everything and nothing. Nothing directly but maybe many things indirectly in society, things that she has opinions and feelings about, political issues and things like that, but nothing is really connected to the work.

And if you look at…
The rules are the rules.

Again the rules! Dover Street Market deconstructs the department store; What's next? Have you got anything else that's going to push the envelope because you always push the envelope…
If you have a good idea, please tell us because we're still doing Dover Street; we're opening in New York in December.

Every city should have a Dover Street.
I don't think so. Some cities lend themselves.

Every big city.
I don't think Paris deserves a Dover Street.

Why?
It's too bourgeois. We did London first because Rei has always felt that energy in London.

What is your favourite city?
She says that there is no one in particular.

I have a question about un-realised projects. It's amazing when I look at your work, at all the projects that have been realised – these thousands of designs and shows. I was wondering whether you have any projects that are un-realised that are maybe too big or too small to be realised. Are there any dreams or unbuilt utopias by Rei Kawakubo?
There's no one particular thing.

So there's no un-realised project?
She says she never does it because she wants to, but it's people who ask her to do it.

That's a good, interesting answer. These exhibitions are not really your thing?
She likes the idea of a three-dimensional exhibition: something that moves, explains and expresses the work. She would like very much to do a 3-D exhibition where the creations, the fashion is moving.

So here we go, that's an un-realised project!
There we go. You found it. She's mentioned this to her staff, and they think it's impossible to work out.

It's not impossible at all! For example,
Exactly.

That's so fascinating. I love that idea of not giving rules to others.
There are a lot of men in Japan who wear the women's collection.

And vice versa?
Not so much vice versa. She said it doesn't happen as much, but some women are big, so they buy men's clothes. Men buy women's clothing for different reasons than some women buy men's clothing.

That's a wonderful answer. And the next question from Nick Relph is what are your memories about visiting Seditionaries [11] on the King's Road?
She can't remember. She remembers going to Sex.

'She does everything. She checks every single detail about everything. Everyday is taken up from morning to night with details, thought and work.'

She says there's not an un-realised project as yet. As soon as it comes, it will be realised. There is nothing on the back burner.

I've got some questions from Nick Relph, an English artist who lives in New York, who is a very big fan which he sent me last night. He said that you're unable to divorce your roles as a designer from that as a business woman. Fashion only occurs in the actual wearing of a garment. What, if anything, do institutional exhibitions of your work mean when both imperatives of dressing and selling are gone? In an exhibition, there isn't selling or dressing – so that leads us to the question that we are obviously very interested in in the art world: what is the role of the exhibition for you?

Pierre Reed had an exhibition that I curated years ago where the dolls move through the space. So it can be done.
It can be done. So maybe you'll have to do it.

Rei, you play and confuse gender codes in both your men's and women's clothing. But is it true that Comme des Garçons staff can only wear collections associated with their gender?
No, that's not true at all. People are free to buy and wear what they want. There are no rules. She never tells people how to wear, what to wear, why to wear.

People do whatever they want.
Whatever they want; and they do.

So you only give the rules to yourself, and no one else? Is that correct?

There was also a collaboration with Vivienne Westwood.
Yes. We sent her the fabrics, and Rei picked out designs she liked then Vivienne made them in our fabric.

I know I can't ask all the questions I have because I have too many, but there is this idea of collaboration which seems to play a big role in your work and extends to other designers throughout the company.
That's not a collaboration. That's business. Watanabe, Kurihara, Ninomiya and Ganryu are a means to grow the company. They're staff, so I wouldn't call it a collaboration.

But what you did with Vivienne Westwood…
That's collaboration.

And the collaborations with the other artists?
The reason for that lies in accidental synergy: 1 + 1 = 3

I think 1 + 1 = 11. That actually leads us to Nick's last question: Do numbers affect you?
She likes 1, 3, 5, 7, 9. She doesn't like even numbers.

So, your favourite numbers are odd numbers.
Yes, definitely. You never see anything in pairs.

Also your favourite colour is black, right? In an interview you once did, you said that maybe it's a time for a new black, because everything is black.
That was a long time ago.

But do you think there is a new black?
It's not exactly her favourite colour. It's just the colour she feels is the strongest. It has nothing to do with whether she likes it or not, but she just feels that black is the strongest colour.

For John Waters, it's about mourning; in the West that's the association, but obviously that's too reductive.
No. He's a great guy, but most of those things are too reductive.

So, it's the strongest colour.
She feels it's the strongest colour.

And what do you think would be the second strongest?
None.

It's black, and that's it. I've taken up all our time now, but I usually publish a handwritten sentence by each artist I interview as a protest against the disappearance of handwriting. Could you write a sentence for me?
In Japanese?

Yes, that would be great.
She says this isn't related to her. She doesn't feel the connection of why she would need to write anything. It's not related to Comme des Garçons but to something else: it's connected with your worry about the disappearance of handwriting. She doesn't see the need for it.

Or, you could just write Comme des Garçons… I understand, no problem. Thank you so much.
She expects that none of this was very useful to you.

'It's not my favourite colour. It has nothing to do with whether I like it or not, but I just feel that black is the strongest colour.'

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) was a 20th-century German philosopher who was best known for his work on hermeneutics (the theory of text interpretation), publishing *Truth and Method* in 1960. He was much influenced by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. He is considered one of the most important thinkers of the 20th Century, impacting diverse areas from aesthetics to jurisprudence.

2. Metabolism is a post-war Japanese architectural movement that mixed ideas about architectural super-structures with those of organic biological growth. A group of young architects including Kiyonori Kikutake, Kisho Kurokawa and Fumihiko Maki presented the Metabolism manifesto at the 1960 Tokyo World Design Conference.

3. Gutai was Japan's most influential avant-garde art collective of the post-war era. Founded by artist Yoshihara Jiro in 1954, the name '*Gutai*' means 'concreteness' and speaks to the engagement with materials its members were experimenting with. Gutai urged an ethics of creative freedom, breaking through boundaries to create some of the most exuberant works and events in the history of Japanese and international avant-garde art.

4. Kazuyo Sejima is a Japanese architect. In 1987, she founded Kazuyo Sejima and Associates. In 2010, Sejima was appointed director of architecture sector for the Venice Biennale which she curated – the first woman selected for this position.

5. Sky House by Kikutake**.** Located in Tokyo, Kiyonori Kikutake's Sky House (1958) is an important building in Japanese post-war architectural history. Here, early meetings took place between the Metabolists, of which Kikutake was a founding member. The architect himself lived here until his death last year. Built on stilts, the house in true Metabolist fashion provided flexible solutions for future changes to the requirements of the house.

6. John Cage (1912-1992) was an American composer, writer, music theorist and artist. He was one of the leading figures of the post-war avant-garde. Through his work with his life-long romantic partner, choreographer Merce Cunningham, he was also very influential in the development of modern dance.

7. Kazuo Ohno (1906-2010) was a Japanese dancer who became an inspirational figure in the dance form known as Butoh, a form of contemporary dance that developed in post-war Japan.

8. The Autumn/Winter 2012 'Flat Collection' was one of Kawakubo's most well received collections, with a ten-minute round of applause at the end of the show. According to *Vogue*, 'People were clapping until their hands were sore, and then some started stamping their feet… proof of the overwhelming gratitude the audience felt for seeing her raise the endeavour of fashion onto a different plane. This season she was working an extended essay in flat, oversize shapes, and pure, lovely colour, and pattern.'

9. The 'Bump Dress' was one of the most important points in Kawakubo's career. Part of the padded 'Dress Meets Body, Body Meets Dress' collection of Spring/Summer 1997, according to *Vogue*: 'Critics denounced the designs as "tumour" dresses, but Kawakubo weathered the outrage, and her larger achievement – her avant-garde triumph – was that she gave people a chance to feel passionately about fashion."'

10. *Oulipo* is a loose gathering of mostly French writers which seeks to create works using constrained writing techniques. Founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais, other members have included novelists Georges Perec and Italo Calvino.

11. Seditionaries, King's Road. A boutique run by Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood at 430 King's Road, London which had many name changes. Between 1976 and 1980 it was named Seditionaries, prior to this it was called Sex. The clothes they sold created the look of the punk movement.

Comme des Garçons Spring/ Summer 2014

Photographs by Juergen Teller

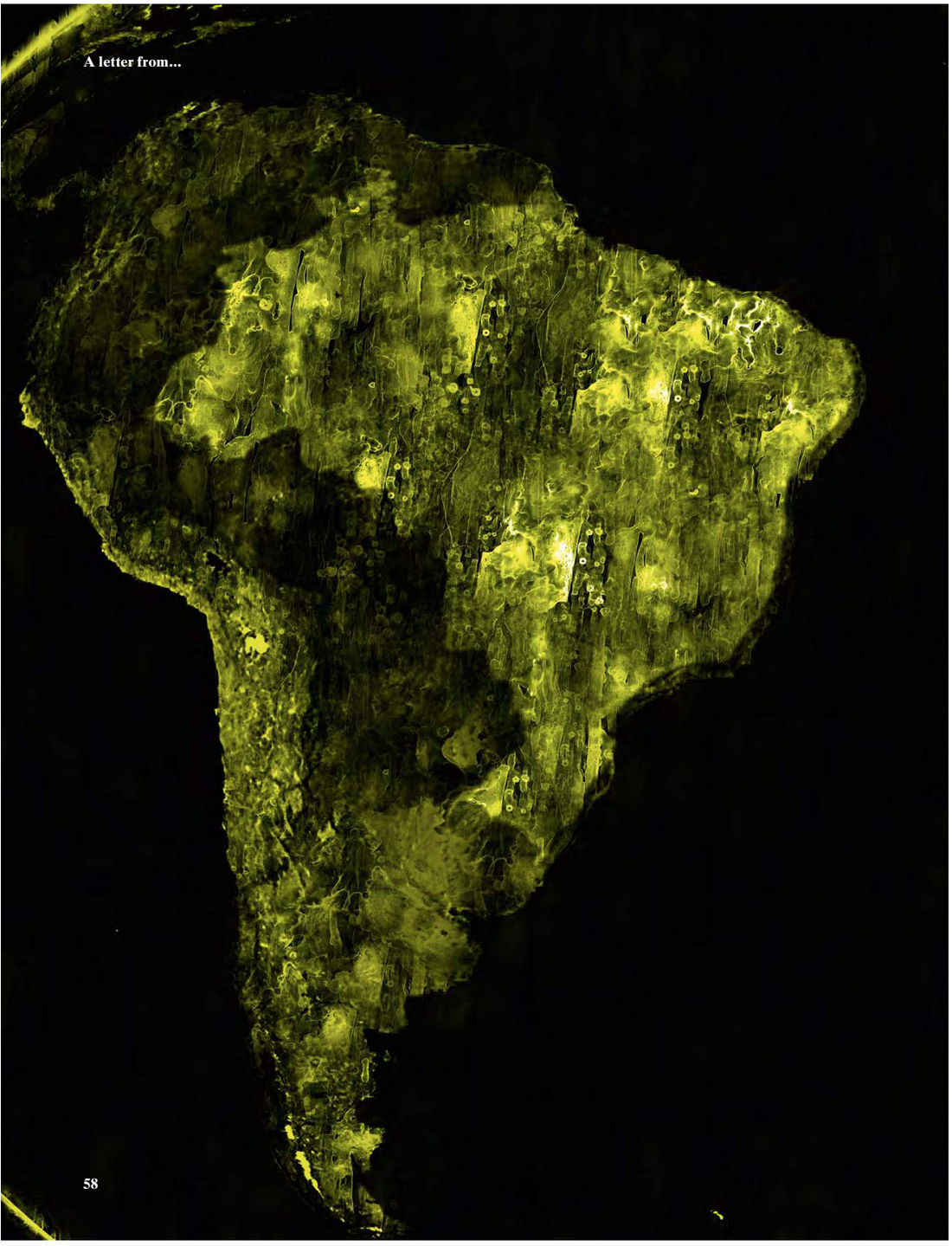
Model: Lily McMenamy @ Next Model Management.
Photo Assistants: Maxim Kelly & Martin Rosengren. Shot at Pin-Up Studio.

Diptyque

By Gaia Repossi & Jeremy Everett

Gaia's soft feminine hand resting on the broken relic of a Roman figure relates to the power of femininity in her work. Gaia's interests in jewellery all stem from her beginnings in archaeology and how individual identity can define an entire civilisation.

Jeremy frequently uses the sculptural concerns of a corner in his studio. The photograph removes the corner, destroys the perspective and sets up a moment in which the hidden corner can be better understood.



Forty million princesses

How Brazil's economic upturn transformed clothing into fashion. By Flávio Rocha. Illustration by François Berthoud.

If there ever were a 'Brazilian miracle', it would have to be the ten-year transformation of one of the most unequal countries of the world into a middle-class nation. Brazil now has the sixth largest economy in the world, the largest in Latin America and the second largest in the Western Hemisphere. According to *Forbes* magazine, in 2011 Brazil had the eighth largest number of billionaires in the world – ahead even of Japan. What has driven this transformation has been a fortunate combination of income growth, a fall in unemployment rates, the democratisation of access to credit and increased trust levels. And so the compressed demographic pyramid of deficiency and neediness has given place to a sparkling diamond shaped figure, with a wide centre that represents the so-called 'New Brazilian Middle Class'.

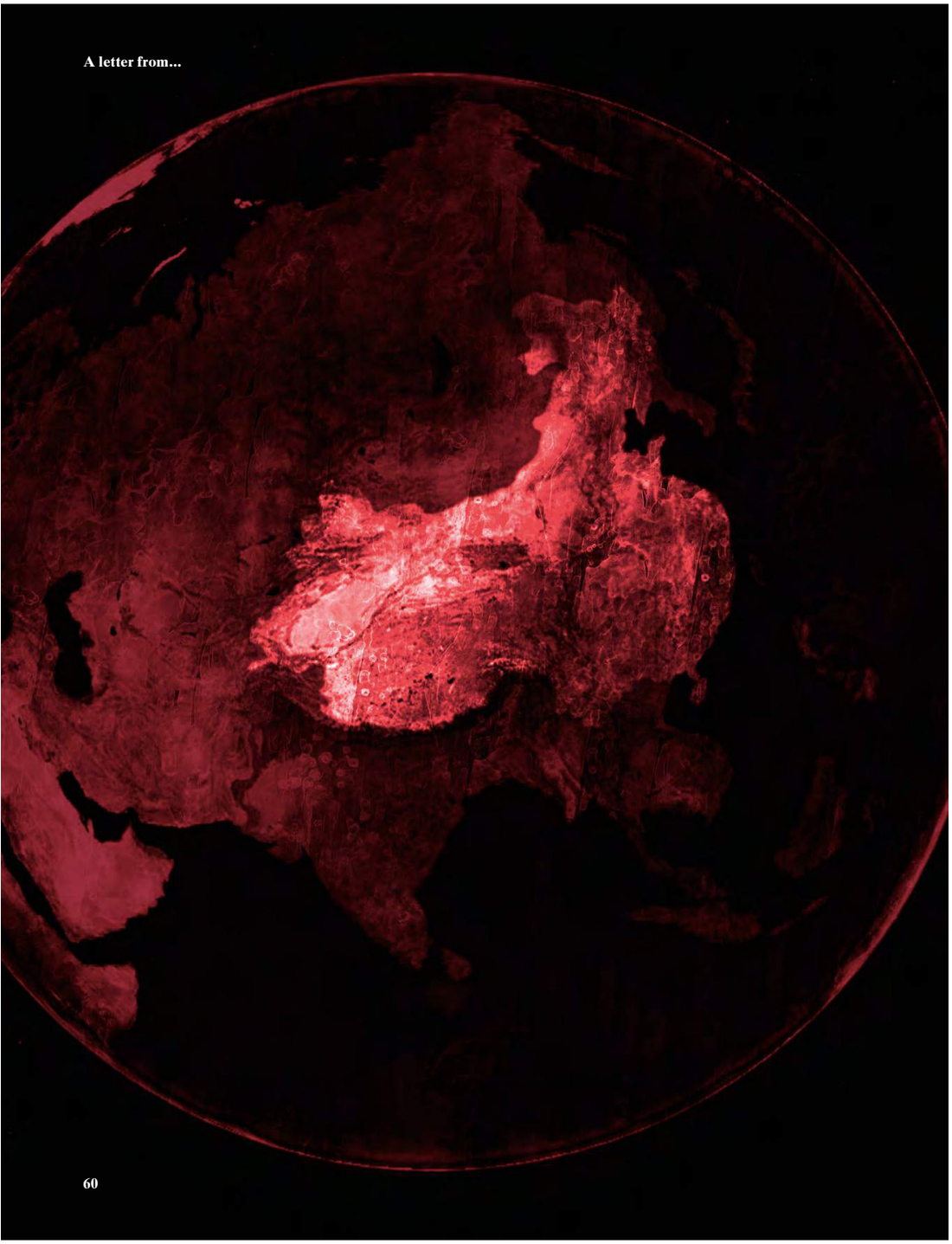
We have seen that the combination of income growth, fall in unemployment and better access to credit has created a virtuous cycle that has allowed Brazilians to eat better, have a better lifestyle, to have easy and affordable access to electronic gadgets such as smartphones, and even to buy their first car. All this is revolutionary indeed, but nothing can compare to the effect this phenomenon has had on the fashion and beauty industries. While the expenditure in housing and food has grown in proportion to income growth (30 to 40 per cent), the expenditure that relates to fashion and beauty has grown five times more than income growth. Fashion and beauty have truly arrived for the ordinary Brazilian consumer, and they occupy a more important place in people's daily lives.

This large-scale fashion breakthrough could not just have been shaped by demographic and economic phenomena, however. Alongside income distribution, something even more overwhelming has aided this growth – and that is the 'democratisation of information'. Historically, clothing has had two different meanings to two different groups of people: those who have an income and access to information use their garments as a form of expression and identity, while those who do not have any of that perceive clothing merely as an alternative to nudity. But now a third group has been created thanks to the fact that the revolution in electronic media, the internet and the Brazilian soap opera phenomenon have democratised access to information at a rate that is much faster than that of the rate of the increase in income. And so this third group is something new to Brazil, and is made up of those 'without income but with access to information'.

So when it comes to the meaning of fashion in Brazil, the old process has been broken. The exclusive and elitist world of the Brazilian fashionista is about to be invaded by voracious consumers who have been touched by the transforming power of fashion. Our company already has a mission to 'democratise fashion', to transform this exclusive and elitist world to one of inclusion and fashion equality for all. That is because we already understand the transformative power behind fashion and its relation to people's self-esteem.

This universe that was known and used by a privileged and restrictive group of people 20 to 30 years ago in Brazil and in the rest of the world is now becoming more relevant to each and every person. In our company, Guararapes, we have been fortunate to possess a front-row seat to view the spectacle that is the 'democratisation of fashion' in Brazil. Guararapes is the largest fashion group in Brazil and also the owner of the Lojas Riachuelo (Riachuelo Stores) fashion retail chain. Riachuelo Stores has 183 shopping units throughout the country, as well as two industrial parks. In total, it employs more than 37,000 people. In addition, Riachuelo is the only major fashion retail chain in Brazil that researches, creates and produces most of its own products, rather than importing brands from outside the country. Established in 1947, we have a lot of experience in the Brazilian retail market and a good and long view from which to compare today's market with its new needs and demands, to the one Brazil has had in the past.

What we are seeing here now in Brazil are 40 million Cinderellas who have suddenly discovered the connection between fashion and self-esteem, and who are on their way to becoming dazzling princesses. Riachuelo works like a fairy godmother that bestows the magic of fashion to transform the lives of the many millions of Brazilian Cinderellas and princes who are waiting to metamorphose throughout our country.



Size matters

For Chinese men, luxury goods are the new penis enlarger. By Hung Huang. Illustration by François Berthoud.

Mao once said: 'Women can hold up half the sky.' He was full of shit. The reality is that China today, like the past 4,000 years, remains a Confucius-style society dominated by men who are insecure about their penis size.

Chinese believe that penis size is in proportion to men's height, and since Chinese men are not tall – except basketball player Yao Ming – most men suffer from some insecurity. There was a joke in the early 1990s that Li Peng, then Prime Minister of China, reported to Deng Xiaoping that he was feeling insecure and small. Deng advised him to go to a certain Swiss clinic and get a penis extension. Li happily heeded Deng's advise. Upon returning, however, he reported to Deng that his insecurity had not subsided; in fact, it had increased. Deng was surprised and said: 'Show me.' After Li dropped his pants, Deng gasped and said: 'Oh no! They gave you mine!'

This small penis complex has also had serious consequences, mostly against women. Men suffering from this complex have huge egos which are easily wounded. Mao was a prime example.

My mother Zhang Hanzhi was Mao's English teacher and later his interpreter. When my mother taught Mao English, he insisted that she only help him to read his own speeches in English. He refused to learn about foreign culture, much less literature and poetry. The lessons were interrupted by the horrific Cultural Revolution and lasted for only 11 months. Fifteen years later when my mother told Mao that she was about to marry one of his cabinet members, Mao turned and declared to a roomful of Chinese diplomats that my mother 'was no longer loyal' to him. Within two years, she and her husband were both under house arrest.

Despite the fact China has offered equal pay to women since 1949 and encouraged women to be part of the work force, it has done nothing to change the age-old Confucian prejudice against women with sayings such as, 'Women without talent are virtuous', and 'Pretty Women are a disaster'. Most women who are successful in China know how to navigate a male-chauvinistic environment. A women entrepreneur told me that she would always let her husband be the public face of their company. 'It's more acceptable,' she said. 'Chinese society will applaud successful men but remains very suspicious of successful women.' All because of Chinese men's insecurity about their penis size.

Since economic reform started in 1980, Chinese men have finally discovered a way to compensate for their smallness – money. Like they say on Wall Street, if you are rich in China, you are a 'big swinging dick'. Men feel empowered by their wealth, they are able to buy everything, including women. Now being a rich men's mistress is listed as the third most sought-after career choice. And when money cannot buy what they want, they resort to violence.

In 2009, two local officials in the Hubei province demanded sexual services from a waitress in a massage parlour. When the waitress refused, the two men tried to force themselves on her. She defended herself with a fruit knife and stabbed one of the men to death. She was charged with murder. Only after massive protests on the internet did the charges drop to manslaughter.

Chinese women have increasingly been victimised by the small penis complex of Chinese men. Objectification, abuse and violence against women are on the rise. Even worse is that the legal system is trying to gloss over these atrocities or, in some cases, attempting to justify them. Recently, a paedophile case was rephrased as 'sexual encounter with minors'; a gang rape was termed 'consecutive sex'. In the latter case, a male law professor even wrote an essay arguing that gang raping prostitutes should receive reduced sentences, since it is less heinous than gang raping non-prostitutes.

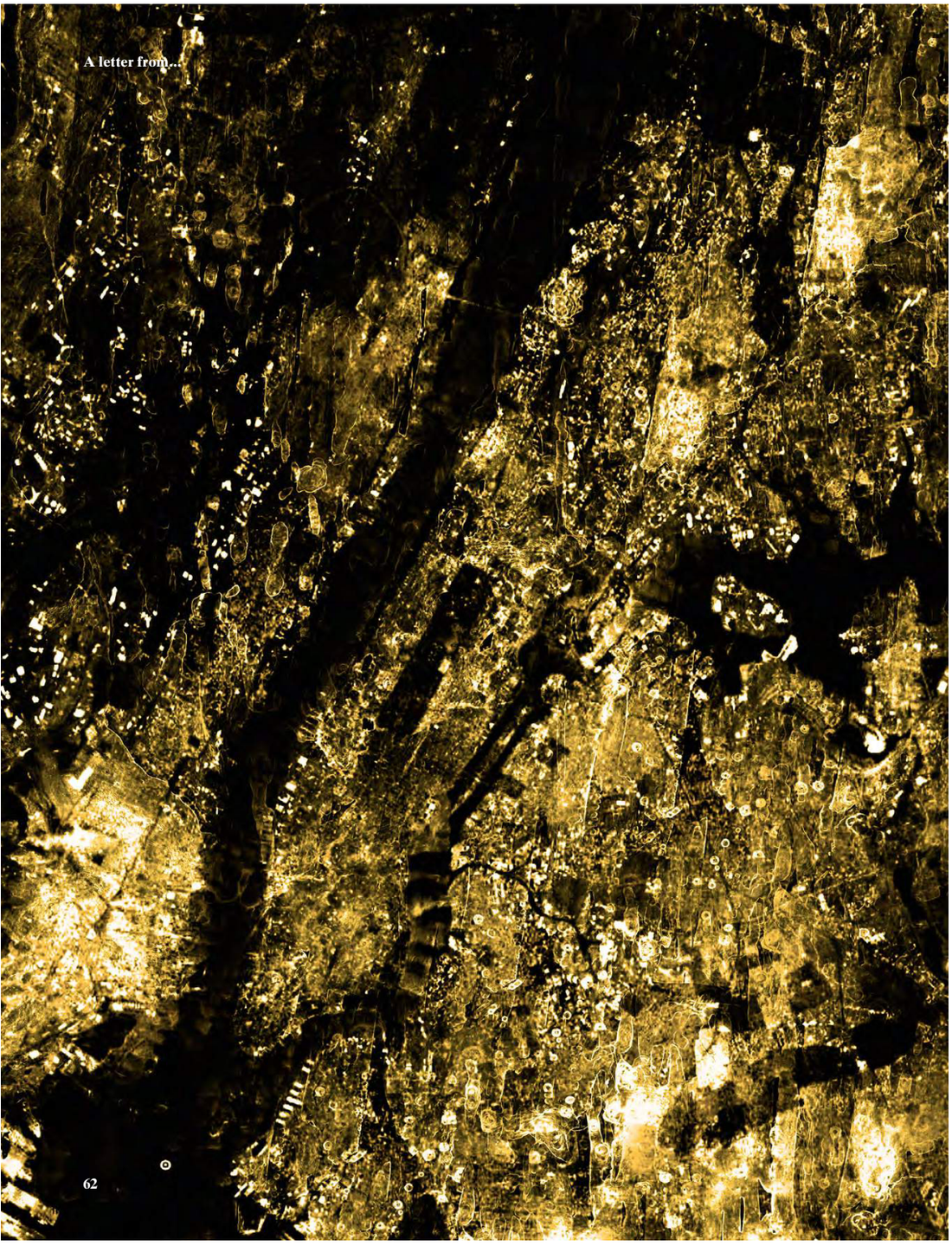
But what does all this have to do with fashion? For one thing, menswear has exploded in China. For some brands, such as Louis Vuitton, Hugo Boss and Armani, their menswear is probably selling better than their womenswear. To be well-groomed means that you have money, and having money means you are a 'big swinging dick'. Hence I predict that menswear will see better growth in China than womenswear.

I once met a fixer in the Chinese legal system. He is a die-hard fan of Dolce and Gabbana.

'Why?' I asked him.

'It makes me feel big,' he answered simply.

So, size does matter after all.



Clothes maketh the woman

New York's *Man Repeller* on sartorial feminism.
By Leandra Medine. Illustration by François Berthoud.

One afternoon, during my sophomore year of high school, I bought a pair of tights. I'd walked to Ricky's – a beauty hub-*cum*-pharmacy – located just three blocks from my school to purchase green nail polish. The victim of a strict school dress code, the only place I could express even a morsel of individuality was on my nail beds. There the tights were, though, languishing on a hook, untouched though they appeared bereaved and defiled. Lively and bright pink, it seemed inconsistent that such a convivial set of stockings could appear so morose. I bought them out of pity, but it was getting cold, and I surmised they might find practical use in my forthcoming wardrobe if not provide a genius school-uniform loophole.

The following day, while getting dressed to go to school, I put them on. Under the usual ankle length, dark-coloured skirt and equally dismal blouse of my Yeshiva day school, the bright pink tights really did seem like a genius escape route – though coloured clothes were rarely allowed, no authority had ever said anything about the colour of our tights.

While my friends and classmates commended on the vibrancy I'd managed to bring into the school building, I couldn't make it to third period without being sent to the principal's office to discuss the state of my legs.

The state of my legs?

'This is a Jewish day school, Ms Medine, and the rules of our dress code and the colours that outline it are not to be taken lightly,' the headmistress told me before continuing to request that I remove my new tights. But what was the big damn deal? I was still dressed modestly, so what if I'd used a pair of tights to tell a tale slightly different to all the other stories embedded in the sea of dark skirts?

Ultimately I was sent home, but it wasn't until almost seven years later, long out of the muddy waters that refused to permit personality cultivation by way of sartorial independence, that I realised the extent to which fashion's power can inform the course of a woman's ability to speak on her own behalf. To put it dramatically, I was being silenced and deprived of the opportunity to use fashion's tangibility and artfulness to speak for me.

While I will be the first to correct any misguided definitions of feminism – the anterior term is deep-rooted in a quest for equality – the power of self expression should not be overlooked when considering this quest. I often hear a very silly question: 'Can you be a feminist and work in fashion?' When offered the opportunity, I counter by enquiring whether it's possible to do the opposite.

As an industry ruled primarily by women and effectively made in large part for us, we're fighting for each other to feel unilaterally beautiful and consequently therefore, powerful, so how could we *not* be 'feminists'?

It occurred to me around the time I launched my blog, *The Man Repeller*, that clothing was much more than just clothing. It was a megaphone. A mule for self-expression imbued with a sense of belonging. I for one was using the self-described 'man repellent' (harem pants, clogs and the like) to explain my relationship status: single during the site's earliest stages, assuming control over the status by reasoning that in wearing my 'repellent', I was choosing to remain single rather than it choosing me. Yes, this was a conscious choice deeply rooted in my predilection for fabric vis-à-vis gentlemen. And though I'm married now, my token self-expressive mule patents itself differently. My leather jacket paired with leather pants and suede loafers says, 'Fuck you, I can't talk right now,' whereas a pale blue shin-length ethereal slip dress festooned with lace trim denotes a sense of inviting femininity all while reiterating that no, I cannot make breakfast (this is Miu Miu, after all).

The arbiters of the fashion industry are a clear assemblage of women using their mode of dress and the choice instilled in said mode to speak. Never mind the fact that we're using our sartorial megaphones to speak for ourselves, on a far grander scale, we are in plentiful instances, creating the megaphones that will allow us to use our respective 'voices'.

As for that Carolina Herrera pant suit, how better to evince that it's a woman's world. He's just living in it.

Paco Rabanne Spring/ Summer 2014 by Julien Dossena

By Jonathan Wingfield
Photographs by Patrick Demarchelier

Models: Emilie Ellehauge @ Scoop Models, Lena Hardt @ DNA, Linn Arvidsson @ DNA, Magdalena Jasek @ Oui Management, Maja Salamon @ Next Model Management, Stina Rapp @ Women. Hair: Tomohiro Ohashi @ Management+Artists. Hair Assistant: Kiki. Make-up: Aude Gill c/o Studio 57. Manicurist: Sophie A @ Calliste. Photo Assistants: Frédéric Bealet, Dovile Babraviciute. Digital Technician: Jimmy Mettier. Tailor: Ayesah Allybuccus. Shot at Studio Rouchon. Retouching by The Adrien Blanchat Company.

Let's start by discussing the Paco Rabanne woman of today as an evolution from the past.

Julien Dossena: With this collection we wanted to redefine the Paco Rabanne girl of today. She is sophisticated and direct with a refined aesthetic. We looked to create something that was both accessible and avant-garde. I wanted to bring the Paco Rabanne girl into the everyday, onto the street. I was interested in the idea of a heroine: I wanted to arm her, to prepare her, and to that end build her a functional wardrobe with a new silhouette – something sharp and sensual. It's a bit like the melding of those two qualities - that's what I find interesting at Paco Rabanne.

The 1960s was an era when man went to the moon and everyone was looking towards the future – you just couldn't avoid it. What in our modern society inspires you?

This fantasy of space and space exploration still exists in our modern world: we saw the Rover land on Mars and discover water! There are also other advances – advances in biology and medicine, on how we work with our bodies, on how we strive to become something more than human... Everyone has some kind of plastic surgery. Everyone works on their physical appearance. Everyone takes stem cells and vitamins. It's no longer the fantasy of space but the discovery of man as an individual. What really interests me today is the integration of biology and medicine, of man and machine.

There are certain materials which are very much tied to Paco Rabanne's history. How did you select the materials used in your collection?

I wanted to work with specific fabrics – innovative materials that push the boundaries. Nowadays, chain mail isn't necessarily the most innovative material. At the time, it was shocking and fun – it could now be viewed as ironic or retro-futuristic. I'm more interested in a Nike windbreaker which is more modern and possibly more 'techno' than reworking the metal materials which Paco Rabanne used in the past. So, I asked myself, what are the fabrics now that we have developed and advanced technologically? We took the savoir-faire of the house but developed the fabrics with modern technology - for example, we took Japanese silks and lacquered them. We also reworked the metal to make it more contemporary. We developed a fabric that looked like mercury and created a pair of trousers that seemed like they were soaked in liquid metal.

Do you have an image of Paco Rabanne in your head that remains quite strong in your memory? And is there a contemporary image that inspires you?

There is a picture that I really love of Jane Birkin walking down the street wearing a chain-mail evening dress. It's as if she got dressed that morning in her metal dress just like she would put on any old pair of jeans. There's a dichotomy that I find very interesting. A modern image I like would be of Sigourney Weaver in *Alien*. There's a scene of her waking up in knickers and a cotton tank top – very classic, very unisex – but she has an astronaut's helmet on. She's trying to protect herself from the Alien. She even has an axe in her hand. [*Laughs*] It's the balance between the axe, the underwear, white tank top and the 'techno' helmet; I like these contrasts.

How would you describe the codes of the house of Paco Rabanne today as designed by Julien Dossena?

Paco Rabanne has a modern heritage. We are re-establishing the codes and developing a strong identity to put the brand back on the market. The values of the brand are unique when you look at it in the context of the luxury marketplace in France; there is an idea of a utopian future, something that is very modern and alive. We thought about how we could push the brand commercially as well as aesthetically. We decided that for Paco Rabanne, innovation comes first. I didn't actually go into the archives because we are already familiar with that aesthetic. What you see now with many collections from other fashion houses is that designers aren't referencing the archives but rather are looking for a new language or vocabulary. You can do that by choosing a few values of the house but not necessarily adopting the previous aesthetic. We look at the past and twist it; so we can look to the future from that perspective as well as our own. You need to find a good balance between the past and the future. I wanted to add my personal touch because I wanted to speak to my generation. In the 1960s, Paco Rabanne was a young designer who wanted to dress the girls of his generation. I want to do the same for mine.

'I wanted to add my personal touch. Paco Rabanne was a young designer who wanted to dress the girls of his generation. I want to do the same for mine.'

‘It’s basically 10 million people on a hunt for the coolest stuff.’

Why everyone from François Henri-Pinault to Will Smith has invested in Joe Einhorn’s digital retail concept, Fancy.

By Jonathan Wingfield
Portrait by Jason Schmidt

Here's a challenge. Try, just try, to visit fancy.com without buying anything. Or at least being seriously temped to partake with the digits on your credit card. Maybe those classic penny loafers from Saint Laurent. Or a night at the Four Seasons Shanghai. Or perhaps those replica Daft Punk helmets you've always secretly had eyes for. Fancy, seemingly, has it all.

In the world of e-commerce, Fancy isn't nearly as fashion friendly as Net-a-Porter or Yoox and maintains only a fraction of the product range of Amazon. But what it has is a global community of 10 million users who, like Fancy's founder Joe Einhorn, enjoy hunting, sharing and purchasing what Einhorn lovingly refers to as 'cool stuff'.

Fancy in itself is nothing. It's like an empty Colette – a building without the Raf Simons jackets, the tech gadgets and the Japanese skateboard decks. But it's this bare platform that allows Fancy's users to show off their curatorial prowess, sourcing an eclectic array of products that then get voted on – or, to use the correct terminology, 'Fancy'd'. Items that get Fancy'd trigger greater user interest. Greater user interest equals sales. Fancy generates sales transactions in the region of $200,000 every day. That's $73 million a year.

On one level, Fancy comes across a little bit 'wannabe fashion buyer'. In the same way that the fashion industry still questions the merits of many self-proclaimed 'style bloggers', so it'll probably have something to say about Fancy's basic concept that we can all be a Colette or Barneys or Opening Ceremony buyer. These are,after all, valued roles in the industry that require an expert's experience and point of view. And anyone with an iPad can't expect that a wi-fi connection alone will enable them to compete.

But then you discover that Fancy's faithful users include luxury group Kering's CEO François-Henri Pinault [fancy.com/fhp] and his 'stock' of enviable product suggestions from the likes of Saint Laurent, Gucci, Bottega Veneta and Puma. And then there's the remarkable list of individuals and companies queuing up to invest in what they see as the future of the online retail experience: to date, the aforementioned Pinault, American Express, Will Smith, Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes, and Twitter founder Jack Dorsey. AmEx president Ed Gilligan calls Joe Einhorn 'a visionary, laser-focused on building something meaningful.' He goes on to describe Fancy as 'an entirely new consumer experience that represents the intersection of community and commerce.'

It's safe to say that Fancy isn't simply a Myspace-esque passing trend. Its user-generated inventory reflects how and society wants to consume, and the simple but sophisticated graphic template makes Amazon and eBay look like old dinosaurs. With the luxury fashion industry now firmly integrated into the Fancy experience, it would be foolish to ignore its growing influence on retail, distribution and even product range.

System met up with Joe Einhorn in his Manhattan office to discuss the online phenomenon that was born out of its founder's love of collecting North Face jackets.

'I never thought about wanting to be a businessman. I just wanted the dopest clothes and all the trappings.'

Would you consider yourself a master of computers?
Yes.

If I had a problem with my computer, would you know what to do?
Yeah, but I wouldn't try to fix it. I'd probably just advise you to get a new one. Unless you had dropped the computer before I came in and you didn't tell me, I'd take a few minutes to figure out that's what you did. But other than that it's pretty basic how they work.

Can you remember the first computer that you had?
My dad passed away more than ten years ago, but he was a big gadget guy. When we were young, he was into cameras because they were the big gadget at the time. Then when computers hit the scene, he was crazy about them too, and got us our first computer. It was called a Micron 286.

That was mid-1980s, right?
1986. By the age of ten in 1991, I was on the computer *and* the internet. I remember how excited my dad was about Windows and the graphic user interfaces of both Apple and Microsoft.

Can you remember the first time you heard about the internet?
I had heard of the internet way back; I was using the internet chatting protocol called Internet Relay Chat or IRC. That was when I was 10, 11, or 12. I probably heard about it from my mom or my dad. But I remember using the internet to get the first proper job that I had. My mom was taking an adult education

programme at a college, and she had an account for her college website where there were job postings for that small community. I was able to use her credentials to find my first work – that was when I was 16.

Were you always computer literate?
For my first job interview, I made an illustration using Photoshop and Quark Xpress. It designed my name – 'Joey' – and put a wave through it. I put that image on a webpage that I'd created for myself. I was 16 and went into this job interview and said, 'Not only do I know about computer programming, but I also know about websites *and* graphic design.' I showed them this basic design, and they were totally blown away!

What about your first online purchase?
I used to go on eBay, which has been around since 1995. I'd look at these items that I coveted. I couldn't afford them, but I'd click around to see who else was bidding on them. You were able to eBay-message each other. Right from the beginning of eBay, I was meeting people online who shared these similar interests about the products I loved.

So, rather than connecting to people through music or sport chat rooms, it was all done on eBay.
As a kid I was crazy about collecting trading cards: sports stars, then Marvel cards – just buying, selling and trading. That interest evolved into a fashion interest because there was a big movement in New York City about collecting, buying, selling and trading certain types of Ralph Lauren, Polo and North Face designs. And sneakers, too.

So you'd discuss limited edition Polo shirts online?
You'd be bumping into people out and about on the streets of New York, or you'd work with people who shared those tastes, so it made total sense to gravitate towards those people on eBay as we all tried to find the coolest stuff. Older guys used chat rooms to meet girls; this was more about friendships – and buying, collecting and trading.

At what point did this online community grow beyond New York, or even internationally. Did you immediately see the scale potential?
The trend was *really* local. I grew up in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and the first thing was meeting people from Brooklyn because that's where the movement started. And then meeting people in Manhattan who weren't that far away, but who I didn't know. And then these other boroughs like Queens... I watched it spread to other states. Now it's obviously international and sophisticated, but back then it made no difference if you were from Brooklyn, Queens or Japan. It was *all* totally foreign to me.

Growing up, I naively had this idea that all American kids of my generation dreamt of becoming a sportsman, a musician – probably a rapper – or a businessman. Which of those three, if any, did you want to be?
All three. I used to play sports and basketball in the park everyday until I started to work. Mainstream rap really happened when I was a kid, but it wasn't about wanting to be a rapper as much as it was everyone talking about the same thing – wanting to get money! I never thought of wanting to be a businessman; I was thinking about wanting to have the dopest clothes and all the trappings.

So basketball was the sport?
…and Michael Jordan was the sportsman. And Nas was the rapper. It's a great pleasure for me now that I get to work with Nas at my company because he's someone I've got to become friendly with – it's terrific. I never really wanted to be a businessperson, though. In my elementary school yearbook, I said I wanted to be a cartoonist or an artist.

Do you consider what you're doing at Fancy to be a creative endeavour?
For me, the internet is a new creative medium, it's very interactive. Way cooler than making cartoons for me is making killer websites and applications. If you look at this company, and look at what my interests were as I was growing up, it's fair to say this is the adult representation of those interests.

I know cool artists – and I love them – but for me it's like, 'make an app!' If you think about Google, they're taking art to a place way beyond what any artist imagined you could go. [*Picks up a black pyramid-tiered object*] You know what this is?

What is that?
It takes your iPhone photos and converts them into Polaroids! For me, this holds its own against any other fine art. It costs $300, it's limited edition, it's

'Older guys used chat rooms to meet girls; this was more about buying, collecting and trading Ralph Lauren or North Face.'

fucking handmade. Our whole thing boils down to this here: it's high tech, it's low tech, it's limited edition, it's handmade, it's affordable, and we sell them around the world. All I ever wanted to do was to be artistic in a way that resonated with people who had similar interests with me.

Fancy is the convergence of commerce and community. What about social networking? Are you a big Facebook user?
I never really took to Facebook. I don't like the idea of keeping track of people who I already know. Facebook is a $100 billion company: a few people get rich off of everybody's contacts or photos from their computer. Whereas at our thing, it's a marketplace where people can buy and sell stuff, and hopefully people's products look good on our system and that's helping their branding and marketing and hopefully driving sales and engaging demand. To me, that makes more sense.

How does one come up with a smart digital solution such as Fancy? Is it by knowing everything that's going on in technology? Or is it by understanding what's happening in the world?
In my case, I'm not a very smart person. I'm always the dumbest guy in the room. I'm not saying that to be self-deprecating, it's just the truth. What happened with computers and the internet is that I was lucky enough to be there from the beginning. When they arrived, everything was so basic that even I could operate a computer to its limit. And then you'd have to wait until there was some innovation – new computer, new chipset, new functionality – and then you'd adapt to that. My entry level into computers and the internet was when they were aligned with my understanding of the world. And as they became more sophisticated, I went along for the ride.

And you've always kept up.
Well, technology is like the fashion and media worlds that you operate in: you see the same shit over and over again. Technology is the exact same: there's no huge secrets, it's all the same shit, just a little faster or prettier. What's the iPhone? It's an mp3 player mixed in with a cell phone that doesn't even work and some paired-down apps. I had the curiosity to follow these things when I was younger; not the intelligence, just the endurance and time spent with these machines.

Do you think it's strange that relatively young and inexperienced people are now ruling the world?
You said it: some of these guys have never had a job before, but now they're the most important business people in the world. Why? Because they made a product that people liked, on a massive scale. On a personal level, there are two things: the development of the technology and product and the other is my interest in popular culture.

Did you get the idea for Fancy and then you had to wait for the technology to enable it to happen? Or was it that the technology was now available that made you think: 'I want to do something like this?'
You're missing the other dimension too: the consumers were also ready to engage this way.

Then again, you already knew that the consumer was ready to engage this way because you'd been doing it yourself on eBay 15 years before – just on a tiny scale.
As a young person, I wasn't interested in people who didn't share my specific product interests. If I didn't like what someone's fashion was, then I wasn't interested in them. Getting older, though, I started to see: there's a guy for whom fashion means nothing, but something else means everything to him. Or maybe it was just about different types of fashion – the stuff that I would think looks ridiculous he would think was the epitome of style. I guess I just grew up and accepted the world for what it is.

Imagine you're talking to someone who is 31 years of age, lives in a city and has never heard of Fancy. What is this thing?
It is the coolest shop in the world. No matter who you are, no matter where you are, no matter what language you speak or read, we're going to present a bunch of really cool things in a slick application where you can add anything to one shipping cart on whatever device you use – an iPhone or Google Glass or Android or website – whatever it is.

You can buy everything directly from us and then we ship it to you no matter where you are in the world. Everything is generated by the community of 10 million people in the world who are

'Making killer websites is way cooler than making art. Google are taking art to a place way beyond what any artist ever imagined you could go.'

on a hunt for the coolest stuff. And as a result of their hard work to identify and express themselves around the coolest products, you gain the benefit of seeing those things before you see them anywhere else.

How does the process go from someone proposing, say, the Polaroid convertor machine you showed me, to your company actually acquiring the distribution rights to selling it?
It's pretty straightforward. Somebody added it, a lot of people started Fancy'ing it and people here who work at Fancy reached out to the creator of this device. This is a speciality shop which does all kinds of projects around Polaroids. They then set aside a quantity of these convertors for us and give us some consideration for pricing and then they were available for sale directly through us.

How often do you get products that you're not able to track down to a specific manufacturer, because they're based in, say, a tiny factory in rural Malaysia? Does that happen?
That was part of the growing pains, but not anymore. We have established so many relationships, and in any case, the majority of times, it is the brands or merchants that are finding us.

What started as a guy who was into rare North Face jackets and sneakers has now transformed into a marketplace where even luxury brands are actively looking to share their wares. How has that changed the experience of Fancy?
I think people are happy about what happened with PPR [the group now known as Kering]. PPR made an investment in Fancy a year and a half ago and, frankly put, we didn't give Pinault any special treatment in return. We used to have no users and now we have 10 million users. People used to ask, 'Oh, what's gonna happen when you've a lot of users, and what's gonna happen when Pinault invests because they're gonna put all their Gucci shit on it?' And the answer is: nothing's changed. The system just keeps rolling on.

So most of the things that are now on Fancy are sourced by the people on it, right? How do these people source them?
These people are trend-hunting fiends. I don't use Facebook or whatever, but if people aren't sharing pictures of themselves from high school they're probably sharing cool products to buy – it's kind of the most basic internet behaviour.

How can you maintain the spirit of the community as Fancy continues to expand? You've talked about your small eBay community in a fond way; there was respect amongst yourselves because you'd identified the fact that you were into the same stuff. How do you maintain that sort of spirit? Or is that spirit no longer relevant?
I think the spirit is extremely relevant… but we don't maintain it; it's been out of our hands since the first couple weeks because the community's just been running with it. All we do is try to continue to make the site and the apps as enjoyable as possible.

I'm impressed by the way Fancy 'owns' everything, in terms of the graphics and the buying experience. The format is such that you can have a pair of Saint Laurent penny loafers next to a camera or a children's toy, and they're all presented in the same format. The toy doesn't detract from the loafers and vice versa. And yet when you go on eBay or Amazon the aesthetics are…
They look like shit.

You'd think they've almost purposefully avoided updating their visual template. Why do you think that is?
These are just archaic products and brands that weren't made for the type of service that we offer. The visual representation is the centrepiece of our offering, and it's an ancillary footnote for those other offerings. We care about how stuff looks and our community cares about how stuff looks and we have a cool-looking app and a cool idea; we'll always try to be innovative about how we present our platform to people.

Do you feel pressure personally to live up to what you've created? Do you see yourself in the lineage of someone like Mark Zuckerberg?
No, definitely not. Our company is like the new shopkeeper. The whole thing about our system is that it's not really about a person. Facebook is a service built around people, so I guess the guy who made it is an important person. But in our case this is more like a museum of products, and I don't think people are going to care too much about one of the guys who works at the museum.

'I really like the buyers at Barneys and Louis Vuitton, but I prefer the crowd-generated selector we've got going on.'

On a scale of 1 to 10 how inspiring did you find that movie *The Social Network*?
I would give it a zero. [*Both laugh*]

Have you read Steve Jobs' biography?
Haven't had the time.

How do you respond to the notion that the general public requires arbiters of taste to help guide them through their lives? The same way a buyer at Barneys does?
As a consumer, I really like the selector at Barneys and at Louis Vuitton; those two are my favourites. As a platform for what we're trying to do, I prefer the crowd-generated selector. I can confidently say that there are individuals in the world who are as innovative and good at curating as those talented individuals at Barneys and Vuitton. That's my democratic answer. I wouldn't want a world that didn't have the coolest shop like Barneys, but we're a little bit competitive: they want people to spend money there, we want people to spend money with us – we just do it in different ways.

Do you recognise ways that retail stores are now behaving that have come about because of things like Fancy?
Yeah, I do. I think that people are getting really creative with their window presentations and their displays. I see people mixing up the categories in ways they'd never previously done. A lot of our queues were taken from really creative retailers like Colette or Barneys.

Do you see ways that the fashion industry is producing or distributing stuff or even actually the choice of product that they're going out and putting emphasis on, it's now somehow being determined by things like Fancy?
Actually, yeah. I know who they are.

Is that flattering? It must be, right?
I don't care, I mean, I could do the same thing. I could use my platform to measure demand and then try to knock off what was there and make a big profit margin or whatever. We're not interested in that.

What influence do you think Fancy currently has on the fashion industry right now?
Well, very little. But if we did, it would have to be, 'the ones who represent themselves in the digital space'. I think that we are simply highlighting the fantastic work that gets achieved in a creative field like fashion, and we are inspired by the industry's creative work. We're just working on getting those products in front of the people that would love it the most. We take plenty of cues from the fashion industry. There's no resentment or anything like that about any sort of concepts or trends. It's all good with me.

What's the principal distinction between Fancy and other e-commerce sites such as Net-a-Porter, Yoox…?
Our inventory is curated by 10 million people. Our stuff is in 40 languages, we ship everywhere in the world. We have a much broader selection of items and we have much higher recommendations. I honestly prefer using our tool to theirs.

Based on all the information that an app like Fancy can amass, what sort of research have you identified about how the world is shopping these days?
Here's what I can tell you: the distribution of wealth has changed a lot. Not just from when I was growing up until now but from when we started Fancy up to now. There's the distribution of wealth, and there's the distribution of taste. Areas where you may have thought people were trend-followers have now become trendsetters, and areas where you may have thought people didn't have money now have more money than in the US or the UK.

What about differences between men's and women's online shopping habits?
Historically or anecdotally speaking, men are not known to shop, whether in-store or online. What works in our favour is the notion of 'discovery plus convenience'.

Looking at the products currently on Fancy, what are your conclusions about your community's shifts in taste?
There are these stylish cross-categories: stylish stuff for the home or stylish stuff that is high tech. It used to be this random occurrence that a new shopper would spend $1,000 or $10,000 on their first purchase. Now it happens all the time.

That's a common occurrence?
I was looking at two yesterday: this one guy bought a really high-tech but stylish watch that was over $5,000, and then there was another order from a new customer in the Middle East, and she just

'One day Kanye West wrote me a five-page email with his insight and feedback about the app and the site.'

bought tons of stuff for her home, but it was also over $5,000.

Does 'stuff for the home' outdo fashion sales on Fancy?
It's interesting because a lot of the fashion brands are now moving into other categories like home products. And they're also trying to get increasingly integrated with technology. And I'm not talking about wearable technology; I'm talking about stuff that's more functional but still designed in a high-fashion kind of way.

What's the most expensive product or type of product that you've ever had on Fancy? Are some things not that appropriate, like is someone going to post a $24,000,000 yacht?
We've had a helicopter up there that didn't sell. That was $5,000,000. I've never thought much about why it didn't sell. In reality, there are a lot of people who think helicopters are dope, but they're not the people that would purchase one, as opposed to chartering or simply admiring. Our average order is $100 or so…

What about the phenomenon of celebrity endorsement? Where do you guys fit into that?
Well, what I think is the ultimate endorsement is something that I'm gonna send you right now, which is Drake tweeting…

@drake
'I've had like 40 boxes arrive from @thefancy – most addictive app in life.'

On Instagram, Drake shows off the items that he bought from us. He bought a Rolex and showed that off. He paid a pretty penny for that thing.

So how do you guys actually go about cultivating those relationships?
We don't. It's them. They find us. They find the app. They find the service, and they shop with us. And then we develop a friendship based on common interests; this is a kind of movement that interests them. The culture is the same as back in the days trading North Face stuff; the scale's just got bigger.

What do you think captured the imagination of some of your high-profile investors like Will Smith or Kering CEO François-Henri Pinault or American Express, or just someone like Kanye West who's a vocal supporter of Fancy?

'Pinault was an early fan and voracious user of Fancy. And he just happens to be more knowledgeable about retail fashion.'

One day Kanye wrote me a five-page email with his thoughts about the app and the site.

What did he write?
Well, Kanye had done something quite inspiring in the past; he had done a blog highlighting cool stuff in the world. It was called Kanye University or something. So what he sent us was just tons of important feedback to help us realise the potential of what we were trying to do at the time. He recognised that we were onto something good, and he just provided us with some great insight.

Obviously Monsieur Pinault's affiliation brought with it a huge validation from within the luxury fashion industry. How did that come about?
Pinault was an early fan. He loves apps, and he loves technology. He was on the Fancy iPad app in France. He just got it really early, and he's always used it… That's him [*shows fancy.com/fhp profile page*]: he's used the app for quite some time. It was a pleasure to meet him because he was a voracious user of our system – like most of our other users – and he just happens to be more knowledgeable about retail fashion.

What about Will Smith?
Will Smith, believe it or not, I got to know through his son who got onto us early as a consumer, and he then turned his dad onto us, too. With American Express it's the same thing: Ed Gilligan, the president of American Express, a company who have invested a lot into the company, is a big user and fan of ours. They're all people who were already aware of us and who saw the potential that we were able to work with.

Last question, why did you change the name from thefancy.com to fancy.com? Did Justin Timberlake advise you to lose the 'The'?
What happened is our app has always been called Fancy; on apps the domain name doesn't matter so people – especially internationally – first heard about us via the app as opposed to the website thefancy.com. Outside of the US, people would refer to us as Fancy. Even with Pinault: every time we spoke he'd talk about Fancy.com. And I was like, fuck, we don't even own that domain, we'd better do something about that.

1960s
Alley Theatre.
Ivory silk-gazar evening gown with crystal jewel embroidery by Pierre Balmain.

‘Coco Chanel said to me, ‘Oh, so you’re the Texan!”

The indefatigable Lynn Wyatt on a lifetime of culture and couture.

By Jerry Stafford
Photographs by Robert Polidori

‘I’m gonna put on a *style* show for you!’ The unequivocal Texan timbre reaches her eager audience even before the socialite and philanthropist Mrs Lynn Wyatt descends the dramatic staircase of her home to enter her exquisitely appointed *salon*. Centre stage she is framed by two 1980s Andy Warhol silkscreens stencilled emphatically with those unmistakable ruby lips, emerald eyes and gilded leonine *coiffure*. A perfectly sculpted 1960s Pierre Balmain ivory evening gown with jewel-encrusted shoulders is the first in a succession of haute-couture silhouettes to be selected from the enviable wardrobe of surely one of the world’s most elegant women, whose notoriety both as a style icon and an indefatigable benefactress and fundraiser has for the last 50 years remained as constant and as unchallenged as her size-zero figure and gravity-defying mane.

I am a guest at Mrs Wyatt’s beautifully decorated home in the Houston neighbourhood of River Oaks, where she divides her time between a busy schedule as vice-chairman of the Houston Grand Opera, executive committee member of the Alley Theatre and trustee of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, with the demands of a sprawling ranch in south Texas called Tasajillo and the breath-taking houses she has had in the south of France including the Villa Mauresque, Somerset Maugham’s Moorish fantasy in St-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, as well as a villa perched above Beaulieu-sur-Mer with stunning views of the Côte d’Azur. While she epitomises an iconic American style, she has also championed European fashion throughout her life, and she is as sublimely elegant in Parisian couture while walking the streets of Vienna with Rudolph Nureyev as she is heading up the Yellow Rose of Texas Ball in a marigold *soufflé* of Oscar de la Renta flounce.

Next up back at the homestead is a 1980s couture cascade of concertina pleats and rosettes in bordeaux *‘taffetas changeant’* by another one of her all time favourites Yves Saint Laurent. She has not only been dressed by these couture giants for many years but has numbered them among her closest friends. Karl Lagerfeld, inspired by her choice of black and white at Chanel, even coined the phrase: ‘Black and Wyatt’.

As she turns on her heels and works the gown to its best advantage, she enthuses, ‘I love this dress. This is what I would call a “drop-dead dress”. I wore this in Paris ,and I wore it in New York. But then I put it away because it’s too memorable!’

As she walks us through a heady mix of several more decades of Ungaro, Valentino and Chanel haute-couture gems in anticipation of photographer Robert Polidori’s tribute shoot, Wyatt is herself an unforgettable and intoxicating mint julep of Southern charm, wit, politesse and intelligence; it is no surprise that she has also numbered among her closest friends some of the the world’s greatest performers, writers, political and cultural figures including Truman Capote, Plácido Dominguez, Elton John, Mick Jagger, Grace Kelly and Ronald and Nancy Reagan.

Not only is Wyatt one of the most revered hostesses both in her own homes and on the global fundraising circuit, she has also enjoyed a 50-year marriage with oilman Oscar Wyatt who in the 1950s mortgaged his Ford for $400 and turned it into the Coastal Oil Corporation with annual sales of $6 billion. They have raised four equally energetic sons.

Mrs Wyatt has never shunned the light either in her private or public life, unlike another infamous Southern Belle, Tennessee Williams’s Miss Blanche Dubois, who could not ‘stand a naked bulb’. She has played an important centre-stage role as one of her city, state and country’s most popular ambassadresses for the past five decades and more recently, she has even trodden the boards for one of her most beloved institutions, the Houston Grand Opera, as a performer in the musical *Showboat*.

Mrs Lynn Wyatt, we applaud you!

Wyatt’s notoriety as a style icon for the last 50 years remained as constant and unchallenged as her size-zero figure and gravity-defying mane.

‘A force of nature and a style icon.’
Elton John, performer

Jerry Stafford: You made your stage debut at the Wortham Theater Center which houses the Houston Grand Opera and Houston Ballet earlier this year…
Lynn Wyatt: I have been the vice-chairman of the Houston Grand Opera for about 30 years.

Patrick Summers, our artistic director and conductor, said to me: ‘We’re doing *Showboat*. I want you to play the Lady on the Levee.’ And I said, ‘What?!’ He said: ‘It’s a speaking role: a cameo.’ The Lady on the Levee is a woman of a certain age; Lillian Gish played her once. It’s eleven lines, but I had to memorise every word. I’d never done anything like that before. I was very uncomfortable with it at first.

1970s
Rothko Chapel.
Fuchsia silk and black jet-beaded velvet evening gown by Yves Saint Laurent.

After every performance, Patrick would ask me whether I was having fun. And I would say, 'Not yet.' Finally after the fifth or sixth performance I said to the assistant director: 'In one hand I'm holding onto my escort, and you've given me this lovely parasol as a prop for the other. Can I ditch this parasol?' And so I did. After the next performance, the curtain had barely dropped, and the assistant came in and said, 'Oh Lynn your voice projected to the very back. It was amazing!' I replied, 'I guess getting rid of the parasol really freed me up!'

So you enjoyed it in the end?
I would get these ovations after my part, and Patrick said to me: 'You know you're not supposed to get this?' and I said 'Never mind, Patrick. I'll take the ovation!'

Sakowitz with my mother and she would say, 'Pick out what you want!' I'd pick out plaid skirts and sweaters, and we would go into the fitting room. I would try them on, and she would say, 'You can only get five pieces'. I had probably 14 pieces in there. But it taught me to really think about wearing this with that or how can I change this around. That's why I am such an accessory nut. Just by osmosis – I've been around fashion for a long time – I love it. I love it, but it's not the main part of my life.

When did you start getting involved in the civic and cultural institutions for which you are now one of the greatest benefactors in this city and in your country?
Well, thank you. I began to get seriously involved in the 1970s.

asked her after the show was, "How did you like Elton John?" And she said, "Oh, Elton John was great, but how about that tenor?!"' I said, 'I rest my case'.

So it's this passion that drives you?
I think the arts are the soul of any city. I think that the appreciation of beauty just opens up your soul and heart: it enriches the soul. It defines a city.

When you were growing up as a young woman, did you have any mentors who inspired you to do this kind of work?
I grew up in a very privileged household. It was just my brother and I. My parents always taught me to give back to the community; my mother was very much affiliated with the Society of the Performing Arts. I too am interested in the performing arts, the Houston Grand

party. You can have the perfect lighting, good music, delicious food, everything, but it's still the people that really make the party. I've been blessed with friends from all over the world that stay in touch. When they would come to town, I would have a seated dinner for 50 people at that house. We'd have dancing in the entrance hall afterwards. But also I would have 20 people or 14 people. I always have a guest of honour because I think that throws a little more excitement into it. We also lived in the south of France for about 40 years where we had a villa. So I had lots of parties there too.

One of your regular guests, particularly in the late 1960s, was Princess Grace of Monaco. Can you tell me a little bit of your relationship with her?
I first met Princess Grace at a special

time, and I was lucky enough to know both him and his wife. So I asked Nancy Reagan if she would have a cocktail reception in the White House. In the evening, I had Julio Iglesias performing who had never been to the States before. The next day, there was a style show and brunch at the State Department. I said to Plácido Domingo, who was also a guest, 'I have you seated next to Mrs Reagan, so you have to be on time.' He said, 'Lynn I am rehearsing in New York!' and I said, 'Well you're just going to have to get there, otherwise I'm not going to put you next to her.' Anyway he came, and then he ended up singing with Julio!

You travelled extensively at this time particularly in Europe, and you started to go to couture shows and become

Who were the other designers that you got to know personally?
I started to work with Emanuel Ungaro and also Hubert de Givenchy, Valentino, Yves Saint Laurent. And I became really, really, really close friends with all of them. I would go to their shows and then we'd go out to dinner. Emanuel came to Houston, and I had a big party for him for 50 people. He still remembers what I served! It's so flattering when people still remember – it warms my heart.

And Hubert de Givenchy?
He's wonderful! I still talk to him. I called him on his birthday; he called me on mine. Every time I go to Paris, we have dinner together. He is a gentleman's gentleman. He is just so special – and it goes back to loyalty. He still keeps up with me, and I keep up with him.

'I would have wonderful times with Andy. We would always go out to Mr Chow for dinner where everybody went on Sunday nights.'

Karl Lagerfeld, inspired by her ever-faithful choice of black and white at Chanel, even coined the phrase: 'Black and Wyatt'.

Let's turn the clock back to your childhood. Your family owned a department store in Houston, Sakowitz. Is this where you got your first taste for fashion?
It was. My Grandma used to tell me that I always had style right from the beginning. When I was about 16, I wanted to work in the store. So my daddy put me in the 'Junior Miss' department. All of these young girls would come in and would ask my advice. So I'm thinking: 'Should I tell them the truth when something doesn't look right or make the sale?' Truth is always the best thing, isn't it? So I would always tell someone: 'You know that really isn't doing anything for you, but let me show you something better.' And so I started getting my own little clientele, I enjoyed that. Before the school year we would go to

In the States, raising funds for institutions is very important as opposed to the often state-funded system in Europe. Could you explain how you approach that?
One has to be passionate about whatever one's raising money for. When I was raising money for the 50th anniversary of the Houston Grand Opera, I was in the south of France. I would call people at 4pm Houston time. People would say, 'Lynn, I don't even like opera'. But Elton John, who had agreed to come, was my hook; I knew if somebody wanted to come to see Elton John and had never been to the opera before, they would come now! We finally had a free simulcast at the Miller Outdoor Theatre. A friend of mine who had taken her daughter called the next day, and said: 'My daughter loved it. The first thing I

Opera, the Houston Ballet, the Alley Theatre, and the Museum of Fine Arts Houston. I'm also involved in The Star of Hope Mission for the homeless; I'm entering my 22nd year with them. And my husband likes to give to medical affiliations. That's a good balance.

1960s

'Mrs Wyatt typifies America, especially Texas, with such refinement reminding me of a heroine from Henry James. She is generous, welcoming and warm. She has championed European fashion like no one else; I adore her.'
Manolo Blahnik, shoe designer

I love entertaining. I agonise over the placement: the people really make the

World's Fair in San Antonio. We just hit it off like a house on fire. She was already married to Prince Rainier. She found out that we had a villa in St Tropez, so she would invite us up to the palace for concerts. She and Prince Rainier would come to our parties, and we would go up to stay at their mountain house. She visited me many times in Houston. In fact, she was coming to America and was going to be visiting me when she had her horrible, deadly car wreck. She was such a loyal friend – I appreciate loyalty and friendship above anything. It was after she died that Prince Rainier called me and he wanted to make a Princess Grace Foundation; he wanted me to do the first gala. So I had the first gala in Washington DC instead of New York because New York has so many events. President Reagan was in the White House at the

close with certain couturiers.
I had travelled to Europe with my parents, but I had never gone to see haute couture. And Oscar said, 'I want you to go to Chanel.' He loves classic clothes. So I went, and I had no idea about the intricate questions they ask, or how they take your measurements, and how they valued what I would choose. I would say, 'Listen, I live in Texas, and I can't just come over for a fitting every minute.' So they made a mannequin of my body. The workmanship! I can turn my gowns inside out, and they are just as beautiful! I have the greatest appreciation for these loving hands that take 100 hours to do some embroidery. I had the opportunity to meet Mademoiselle Coco Chanel in the 1960s. I was thrilled. She came into the studio, she didn't stay long, but she said to me, 'Oh, you're the Texan!'

And Yves Saint Laurent?
I was never part of his close entourage, although I would see Betty and François Catroux [2] in Paris. I liked him very much, and I appreciated the part of him that was very shy. He would sometimes come into the dressing room, but I never had the closeness with him that I had with the others.

Space exploration in the 1960s of course made Houston the focus of international attention. How did you experience this time?
That was exciting. I would have the astronauts to my house for dinners all the time, the first eight astronauts like Alan Shepard. In fact, it was Alan Shepard that gave us a framed picture of a flag that was on his jacket when he went to the moon and another picture that he

1980s
Houston Grand Opera & Ballet,
Wortham Theater Center.
Bordeaux silk-plissé taffeta ball gown by
Yves Saint Laurent.

took of the moon. My husband Oscar loved flying, he was a pilot, and we had several airplanes so he and Alan would talk airplanes. There's something about pilots; they are doers, they can make up their minds in a split second. They are comrades, and they love each other immediately. He wrote on one of the pictures there: 'Dear Lynn and Oscar, this is what happens to old aviators'. It was so cute.

You already knew Truman Capote in the 1960s. Tell me about him coming to Houston and staying at the house.
I first met him at a party. He had this voice that throws people off for the first five minutes, then you realise how brilliant he is. We sat in a corner, and we talked and talked and talked. Somebody asked him, 'How did you meet

known by this time?
He was a great visionary, a great genius. I met him through Fred Hughes who worked with him at the time. He was very shy, but when he came to Houston we connected. I decided that I wanted a portrait. Andy was really the John Singer Sargent of our time. So he came to my house, and he took Polaroids of me. I forgot about it for a while and then I found out that he had done four portraits. I said, 'I'm not going to buy four.' So I asked him for the two that he thought went best together. I would have wonderful times with Andy. We would go out to restaurants; he would always go to Mr Chow where everyone went on Sunday nights. And I would have lunch with Andy and Fred alone. Andy was a great listener. I find a true artist is an observer.

I knew them as a couple. I had such admiration for Mrs D, and we would have wonderful talks together. I contributed to the Byzantine Fresco Chapel, which was built by her son François de Menil and was the last project to be completed by her in her lifetime. One day she invited me to this long dark rectangular room – this would later be Richmond Hall, the Dan Flavin Installation at the Menil Collection. She was at the opposite end of the room and said, 'Come in Lynn, come closer.' So I started walking towards her, and the room grew a bit lighter. As I came closer to the light, she said, 'Stop!' So I stopped. 'Now, look up.' I looked up, and there were these paintings adhered to the ceiling, 13th-century Byzantine frescoes from Lysi in Cyprus. I was so overcome, I had to lie down on the ground

in the late 1960s or the early 1970s. My stomach would start hurting because I would be twisting so hard. So if I knew I would be going out dancing, I wouldn't eat that much for dinner. And I loved dancing at Studio 54. They took it to another level. The creativity plus the fact that Steve Rubell did not let everybody in. That doorman had more power than anybody, and that made people want to go even more! After every dinner party that I would go to in New York, people would get up and leave after the dinner and go to Studio 54. Nightclubs! Even in the South of France when we had our villas, we'd go to Régine's. It was a major change. I met Liza Minnelli then, and she would come and stay with me in the south of France every year. I love her. Those days, I was travelling a lot to Europe. I met Mick Jagger, who is

Another American designer that that you also favour and obviously have a friendship with is Oscar de la Renta. What do you find inspiring about the work and the man?
Well first of all, I love the man! He understands what women want to wear to look pretty. That's why they all go to him for a special wedding, for a special ball. I went to him to make a made-to-measure dress for my Yellow Rose of Texas Ball three or four years ago.

Tell me about Karl Lagerfeld!
Karl! I l dream about Karl! First of all, I think he is a true genius. He captures the essence of what Mademoiselle Coco would probably be doing today, as well as, if not better than her. You also rarely see a person who is a creative artist and a businessperson as well. Those parts

It's the collection that Karl created in order to celebrate the work of the *petites mains*.
And there's nobody that appreciates the *petites mains* more than I.

In the 1970s, Truman Capote was writing his infamous *roman à clef*, *Answered Prayers*, of which in 1975 he sold four chapters of the novel-in-progress to *Esquire*. This resulted in an uproar among Capote's friends and acquaintances, who recognised thinly veiled characters based on themselves. Tell me about this. Did you feel betrayed by Truman?
Oh, not at all. I feel like Truman was really in love with these women. I think that we're lucky that we weren't talked about because that's just the way it turned out. But I don't think he expected it to turn

She's as sublimely elegant in Parisian couture as she is heading up the Yellow Rose of Texas Ball in a marigold *soufflé* of Oscar de la Renta flounce.

'Helmut [Newton] gave me so many pictures. There's one with this gorgeous girl, and she's nude – I have to keep telling everybody it's not me!'

Lynn?' And he said, 'It was her emeralds that brought us together.' [*Laughs*] He would tell all of these funny stories. We became very, very close. He came to stay with two duffle bags, and I said, 'These are so heavy!' I asked my butler to take them upstairs. I saw him pick them up and said, 'Truman, what do you have in those duffle bags!?' 'My books.' [*Laughs*] He was probably the best raconteur I have ever met: he would have me on the edge of my seat. He would love to talk to Oscar because he loved businessmen. He would make Oscar laugh. Finally Oscar would say: 'I have to leave you two down here to talk. I have to get up at 6 o'clock tomorrow.' And we would talk and talk. He was one of a kind.

Another one of a kind is Warhol, whom I presume you would have already

1970s

'For me, she is the ideal Texan.'
Karl Lagerfeld, fashion designer

Another great artist that your name is linked with through your work at the Rothko Chapel [3] is Mark Rothko. Can you say a little bit about the chapel?
I had always gone to events at the Chapel when Mrs de Menil was alive. I was fortunate to know her, but it was only when I was asked to chair the 40th anniversary of the Rothko Chapel that I really became closely involved in its programme.

The de Menils are at the heart of Houston's cultural history and development. Can you talk a little about your relationship with Dominique and Jean de Menil?

and look up because it was so powerful, so beautiful. She said, 'I know you're very spiritual.' Like her, I believe that all religions are good, and they all preach love and kindness. She was a visionary. How many contemporary artists have museums named after themselves? The Rothko Chapel and the Twombly Museum, both designed by the de Menils, who had this vision of making museums for living artists.

The 1970s were known as a decade of hedonism. How did you experience the heady era of the 1970s? For example, did you go to Studio 54?
I went to Studio 54. It was happening. What changed everything was the presence of a disc jockey and dancing. It started earlier when everybody was doing 'The Twist'; I got a trophy for it

fabulous, a real musician and very intelligent man. He was so interesting, in a surprising way. He is very, very smart.

And of course style-wise in the 1970s, were you wearing American designers like Halston, Oscar de la Renta, Giorgio di Sant'Angelo, or were you still favouring European couture?
I love Halston! I love, love Halston!! I still have double-ply cashmere capes that he made. He made them in a special shape that you're supposed to sling over your shoulder. He made it in this special form, and I've got it in every colour: black, black and white, camel… My choices, especially about haute couture, were classic with a little twist to it. I think that's why the ones that I'm wearing in these portraits, I could still wear today.

of the brain don't usually go together – creativity and business – and Karl is a businessperson; I've seen him in action! He has a real business mind. For him, it's a duel combination. He is also so brilliant and can quote what ever you want him to quote. He talks so fast and in every language that he speaks. One of the most wonderful memories that I have is when he asked me to go to Venice with him. It was for the Film Festival. To see Venice through Karl Lagerfeld's eyes, I mean, I was swooning! I just fell in love with him! And even though I don't see him that much, I'm still in love with that man.

He is planning to go to Dallas in December to show the Chanel Métiers d'Art collection.
I know. I hope I'm invited!

out that way either. I think to be a real writer you have to observe. And he was a writer. We all knew that! He was an entertainer, but he was also an observer. It was his job, just like Oscar going to his office. It was where he drew from for his material. So I never thought of it at all like that, in terms of betrayal; I never looked at it in that light.

Other great observers are photographers, and you have been photographed by some of the greatest. Tell me about Slim Aarons, one of the great 'society photographers' from the 1950s through to the 1970s.
First of all, he loved photographing and would tell wonderful stories. He took a couple of pictures of my sons and would say, 'I can't put them in the magazine because you look like you're their

1990s
The Dan Flavin Installation
at Richmond Hall, the Menil Collection.
Red silk-mousseline ruffled evening gown by Valentino.

© 2013 Stephen Flavin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

sister!' I was also on the cover of *Town & Country* photographed by Norman Parkinson. I think that these photographers get the picture they want by talking with the person and understanding. They must be psychiatrists or psychologists as well as artists in order to make the person feel relaxed and do what they want them to do. Same with Helmut Newton…

When did you first meet Helmut?
I met him and his wife, June Newton, in the south of France. We became very close and would see them often. I would come to the south of France in the first part of July, and they would be the first people we would see there. They would take me out to dinner, just the three of us; it was like a ritual. We would go to Rampoldi in Monte Carlo. One time he these pictures that he took of me, and I thought that I must hang them. And when he realised that I was hanging these pictures, he gave me more pictures, so I hung them up as well. There's one picture with this gorgeous girl at the end of a diving board, and she's nude – I have to keep telling everybody that it's not me! Anyway, people would come in from New York and would ask to see the 'Helmut Newton Room'! Finally Helmut found out about it, and Oscar said, 'Helmut, don't get too excited – it's in the downstairs powder room!' So, then he sent a picture of himself pointing his finger, and underneath it says: 'I am watching you.'

her, 'Oh! Where did you get that? That looks fabulous!' She said, 'I borrowed it from George Hamilton.' Andy Warhol came down too.

Can you remember your outfit?
I think it was a purple leather skirt with a jacket with purple boots and a purple hat. We were dressed up to the nines with a lot of fringe!

One of your closest friends is Elton John who has been a great supporter of a lot of the work you do. When did you first meet him?
He has been a good close friend for about 20 years. I met him in Houston. I had lunch with his then agent who asked me to Elton's concert that same night, and he said that Elton wanted me to go to his dressing room before the show.

In the 1950s, her husband Oscar Wyatt mortgaged his Ford for $400 and turned it into the Coastal Oil Corporation with annual sales of $6 billion.

was commissioned to do a portrait of me by *Texas Monthly*, and he decided since it was a Texas magazine, he was going to put me in the oil fields. So he scouted a location, and there's this portrait of me standing with oil fields in the background, and I have on this stunning Yves Saint Laurent cape that comes all the way down over this evening dress. He just knew exactly what he wanted. He was a great friend. I'm still friends with June, and this summer when I went to the south of France, we had lunch together. I'm loyal to my friends because they're loyal to me.

I also believe you have a room in the house dedicated to his work.
[*Laughs*] He gave me so many pictures. He would sign them all, from the 1970s to the 1980s. And I had all of

1980s

'She is as peppy as a little 16-year-old and so much more fun!'
Jean Pigozzi, philanthropist and photographer

One of the infamous parties you threw in Houston was to celebrate the opening of the film *Urban Cowboy* in May 1980, when you rode the mechanical bull at Gilley's Club during the party.
Yes! It was a film with John Travolta and Debra Winger, and they wanted me to host a party at this place about 30 minutes outside Houston. So I rented out one of the movie theatres, and then had a big bus to bus us over there. We were all in Western garb! Jerry Hall and Mick Jagger came, and Jerry had on this fabulous gold bodysuit. I said to

So I went to his dressing room, and there was this rack of clothes about 14 feet long, on which were hanging the most fabulous outfits with the shoes that match and sunglasses in another case that match everything. And I said, 'Wow, do you go on tour with this?' He said, 'This is just for tonight.' 'Just for tonight!?' He said, 'Yes. I'm away from home, and I like to make my choice at the last minute.' And I said, 'Well, I'd like to see your real closet.' He said, 'I'd' like to see yours.' And he underlines yours. That's when we became fast friends. Then he bought a villa in the south of France that was 15 minutes away from my villa. That's where we really became close because we were together a lot then. He just loves entertaining and composing. And over the years, he has just turned out to be the most amazing human being. I gave the 50th anniversary gala for the Houston Opera, and I had Elton John come. He is so loyal, so smart, so funny, so amusing. And he's so caring. I don't know how to explain how loving he is. So it's just a blessing to know him, for him to be my friend. I can't say enough about this man.

And you of course come over every year for his White Tie and Tiara Party in Windsor. It feels like you've never missed one.
That's exactly right. It was the 20th anniversary this year. In fact, it's not even a White Tie and Tiara Party anymore; it's called his White Tie Summer Ball.

I was interested to know who were the important opera singers and ballet dancers that you have met. I believe you met Rudolph Nureyev.
You're sneaky. You know all of these things!

I'd love to hear about Nureyev.
He was brilliant, moody, exciting, opinionated, fun. One day, my husband was going to the OPEC meeting in Vienna, and I had read that Nureyev was going to be performing in Vienna. I had met him on Stavros Niarchos's boat, and we had become fast friends. He asked me to come up on the higher deck with him while he stretched. I'm sitting there on this fabulous boat, the Atlantis, and he has Tchaikovsky blaring out. Here I am looking at this perfect specimen of man with the sun going down, the clouds just forming in the most beautiful pinks and reds, and I'm thinking, 'Don't ever forget this!' So back to Vienna, I called him to see if we could see each other there. He said, 'Well I'll be rehearsing, but I want to show you my Vienna!' Fabulous! So the first night Oscar had dinner in this famous restaurant, and Nureyev said he'd meet me there after his rehearsal. Oscar was teasing me, saying he'll never come. During dessert, I hear this rumble and I see Nureyev come in. He's in a full-length cape with a knit cap over his head. He walks over, takes this black cape, twirls it around his head, and points his toe, puts his nose down to his toe, and does this fabulous bow in front of my chair. And the whole restaurant bursts into applause. I mean it was just so incredible. Then he asked Oscar if he could walk me home. He walked me through these little Viennese streets saying, 'I want to show you this tapestry that I'm thinking of buying.' From

'When everybody was doing "The Twist", I got a trophy for it. My stomach would start hurting because I would be twisting so hard.'

then on, Nureyev would to take me to all these places after his rehearsals. I mean he had girls and guys following him everywhere. I would say to him, 'Why don't you just turn around and wave at them? All they want is a little acknowledgement from you.' He kept on walking, saying [*laughs*] 'No way.'

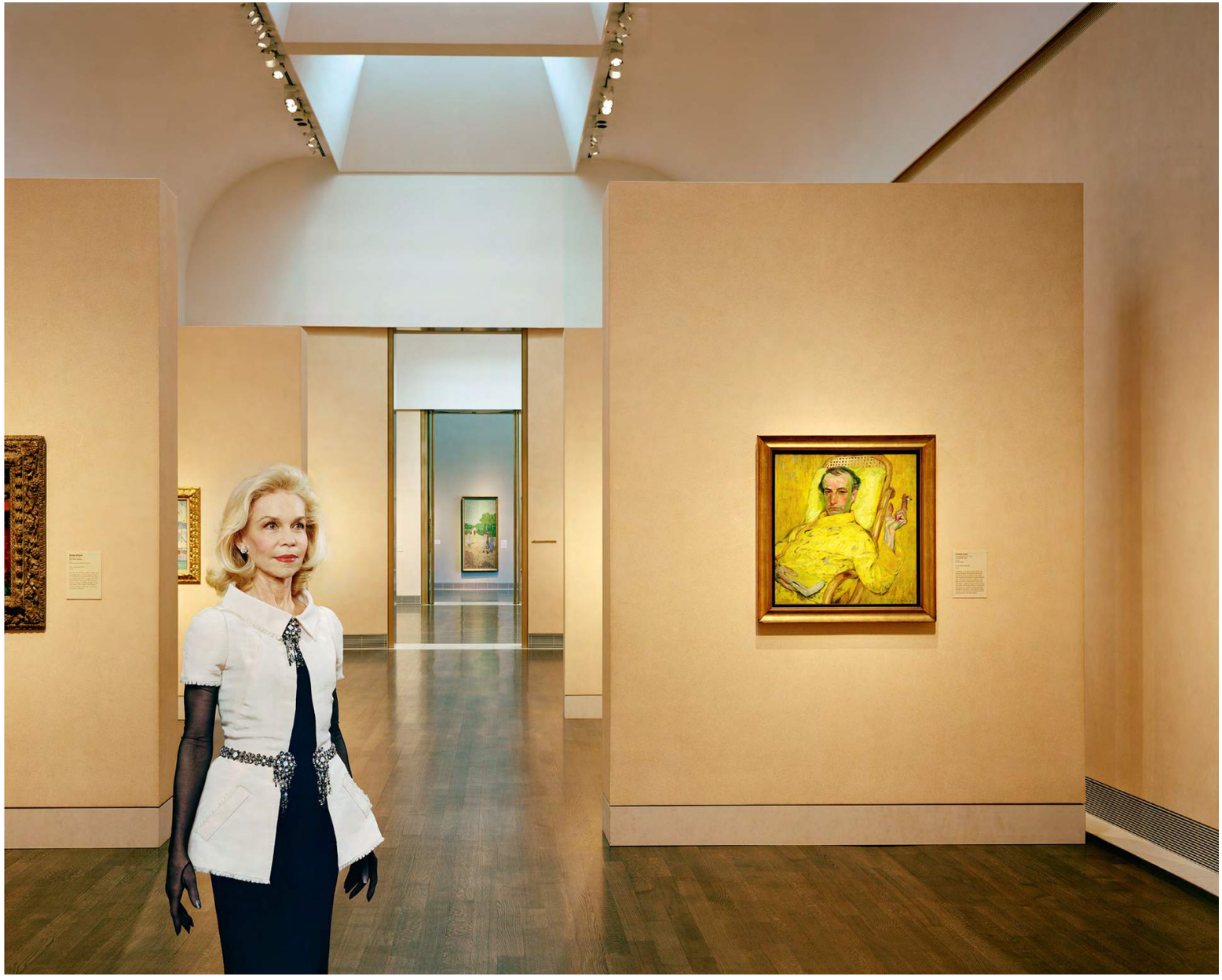
1990s

'She is the best friend. I cannot say anything more… Or maybe yes… That she is super chic, beautiful, smart, witty, fun, a good mother and wife, in love with life.'
Valentino Garavani, fashion designer

Another one of your great friends is Valentino, whose fabulous red dress you were wearing at the Dan Flavin Installation at Richmond Hall, which Dominique de Menil commissioned in 1990.
I'm thinking I may have worn too many ruffles. But it's about the 1990s – we wore extreme things. Valentino is a loyal friend. I met him by going to his shows. I always said that no king lives better than Valentino. He has a way of style and life. I've been a houseguest at his chalet in Gstaad several times. He goes out to ski and when he comes back he looks exactly the same. His little cravat is perfectly done. His hair never gets out of place. His suntan is absolutely perfect. The most exciting party that I've ever been to was his big 50th anniversary in Rome when he rented the Coliseum. It was a three-day deal and had these incredible dancers swinging on beautiful Valentino red materials doing acrobatics like Cirque du Soleil. It was incredible with the most beautiful opera and music. Everyone was practically crying. So I went up to him afterwards, and I said, 'There's the Pope and then there's Valentino'. [*Laughs*]

There was often a restraint to certain clothes in the 1990s. I wondered if you're someone who favours simplicity and practicality when it comes to style.
Yes, I love to mix things and I love to accessorise. And I can wear a couture skirt with a black fitted H&M T-shirt and a black patent-leather belt!

Tom Ford was also an important figure in fashion in the 1990s.
I love his clothes. The latest thing I have from him is this sapphire-blue velvet jacket with sheer cut-outs. I am crazy



2000s
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
Pale rose silk and jewel-embroidered
black velvet evening gown by Chanel.
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2013

about him. I had a good time with him when we were in India together. He's a perfectionist, but he's got a good sense of humour. He's got great style, and his first movie I might add is really something. And he's so handsome!

2000s

'From the moment I first encountered Lynn walking across the terrace of Elton and David's house in Nice, I was completely entranced. She has it all: style, grace, poise and beauty… and that's all before you hear her speak… wow! What a voice! What's so remarkable about Lynn, however, is that beneath the immaculate and beguiling exterior, there resides a rare humour, a fine intelligence and a steely resolve to fight for causes she fervently believes in. And to top it all she can have a soufflé whipped up at the drop of a hat!'
Jay Jopling, White Cube Gallery

You have many friends in the contemporary art world including some of the most influential gallerists. Jay Jopling is a good friend, and I believe he asked you once to help him out at the White Cube Gallery in London.
[*Laughs*] I can't believe you're going to bring up that story! He kept saying, 'I really really like your voice.' He said, 'Would you mind talking on my voicemail on the weekends and just saying that my gallery is open on certain days of the week or whatever?' I said, 'Jay, you've got to be kidding.' He came back to me and said, 'I'm really serious. I want you to do this. We're not going to have it forever' So one day when I was in London, he asked if he could send a professional recorder from the BBC to record me. 'I'll have it all written down. But you can do your own thing as well.' So at 11 o'clock, the man arrived with all of his equipment. He was looking around in my suite, and he finally found this closet. And he said, 'Lynn would you mind going into the closet and saying just a few things over this mic?' And I did.

Another organisation that you have been involved in Houston is 'The Brilliant Lecture Series'. How did this series come about?
The idea was initiated by our founding director Scott Brogan – to have brilliant people speak to young people to inspire them. The first one was Queen Noor; she was wonderful. Since then Scott has come up with incredible ideas. Sidney Poitier and Maya Angelou came, and I interviewed George Clooney which was great. There were more adults there than children I might add! More women then men! And recently we had the Hungarian violin prodigy, Edvin Marton, perform with an amazing Stradivarius. He got a scholarship for Juilliard, and he performed for the Moscow Tchaikovsky Symphony Orchestra when he was 12 years old. He put on a special performance that was unlike anything. There were four attractive women that played beautifully on the stage with him and then these two dancers came out to dance with him. It was absolutely mesmerising. We try to do things three or four times a year.

And there's also the Texan-French Alliance for the Arts. Can you explain a little bit about that?
About seven or eight years ago the French ambassador came to Houston, and I was seated next to him. He had the idea of having French artists come over and American artists going over to Paris. That turned out to be a wonderful exchange!

2010s

'Lynn is about the coolest woman I know. I even have a T-shirt with her face on to remind me of my manners, decorum and hell, to have fun in my crazy life.'
Sam Taylor-Johnson, artist and filmmaker

'I would have the astronauts over to my house for dinners all the time. In fact, Alan Shepard gave us a framed picture he took of the moon.'

It's been interesting to observe you with the artist Robert Polidori, with whom we have been working with on our shoot for *System*. Describe that interaction and how you connected with him.
I met him for the first time the night he arrived in Houston at a dinner that was given by François de Menil; I connected immediately. He has an emotional side to him, and he even said, 'I'm an emotional man.' I ended up putting my arms around him, saying, 'Oh, you're just adorable! Adorable!' He said, 'And so are you!' And he was telling me about his 18-month-old daughter, and I could tell that she was the light of his life. He's a perfectionist. It's the first time that I have ever known a photographer that takes only one picture, two pictures, period. He spent hours setting everything up, but I was in and out of there in 15 minutes. It shows how much of a perfectionist he is. He had a little piece of tape on the floor where I was to stand. He told me where to look on the walls. And if I varied just a little bit, he would say, 'Go back four inches.' And he really meant four inches, not four and a half! [*Laughs*]

On the last night of our shoot we did portraits at James Turrell's *Twilight Epiphany* Skyspace [4] on Rice University Campus which opened last year.
Turrell has that same incredible creativity. I love that and appreciate that. I am so open to new things. I'm not set in my ways. I'm anxious to learn, and I like it when somebody can even change my mind.

It's a good quality to have.
Well, thank you. I think up until our last breath, we're still learning.

And on that last night, you were wearing the magnificent black Ralph Lauren ensemble beneath the James Turrell Skyspace. Ralph Lauren is a designer who is exploring the manifestation of the American Dream in his designs.
I'm an Oscar de la Renta girl, I'm a Carolina Herrera girl and I am a Ralph Lauren girl.

You also keep up with the younger designers. You've recently been fitted by Roland Mouret in London for example.
I had heard about and seen some of his clothes. And I thought, 'Oh my goodness, I've got to look him up!' And sure enough, there was a small dinner party, and he was there. We started talking, and I said that I was a fan of his work. He said, 'Why don't you come to my studio tomorrow?' So I did, and I got some incredible pieces from him.

It's not only young designers you meet but also musicians. For example you know Lady Gaga. How did you meet her?
She was also a houseguest when I was at Elton John's for his White Tie Summer Ball about three or four years ago. She was rehearsing for her performance at the Ball, and she came in to have lunch with us. Her skin is so beautiful! She's just so young. Of course I think everybody is younger than me! I admired how she had such poise. She knew exactly how she wanted to perform and how she wanted everything to be. I had a wonderful time talking to her and when the performance and the gala were over, we came back to the house. Elton said, 'Let's put on our dressing gowns and meet downstairs.' She and I started talking, and we hit it off. I'll never forget, she said to me, 'When I grow up, I want to be Lynn Wyatt!' And I said, 'Are you kidding! You're only 19 years old. In three months, you're not even going to see me in your rear-view mirror!'

Houston is now a city that is internationally recognised as a centre for the arts. How would you describe your hometown?
That's a good question. This city is very sophisticated. It has become international. Houston has so much diversity. We are a third Hispanic, a third African-American and a third Caucasian. It's amazing now how truly international it is. I love Houston. I am proud to be a citizen of Houston, and am proud to be born-and-bred here. My family goes back three generations, and it's my family that really taught me to give back to this city and to give back to community. I try to give back as much as I can. And I don't like to put my name on other things unless I'm really contributing and involved. There are a lot of things that you have to say no to, but I'd rather be passionate about something and give the most that I can to those things that mean the most to me.

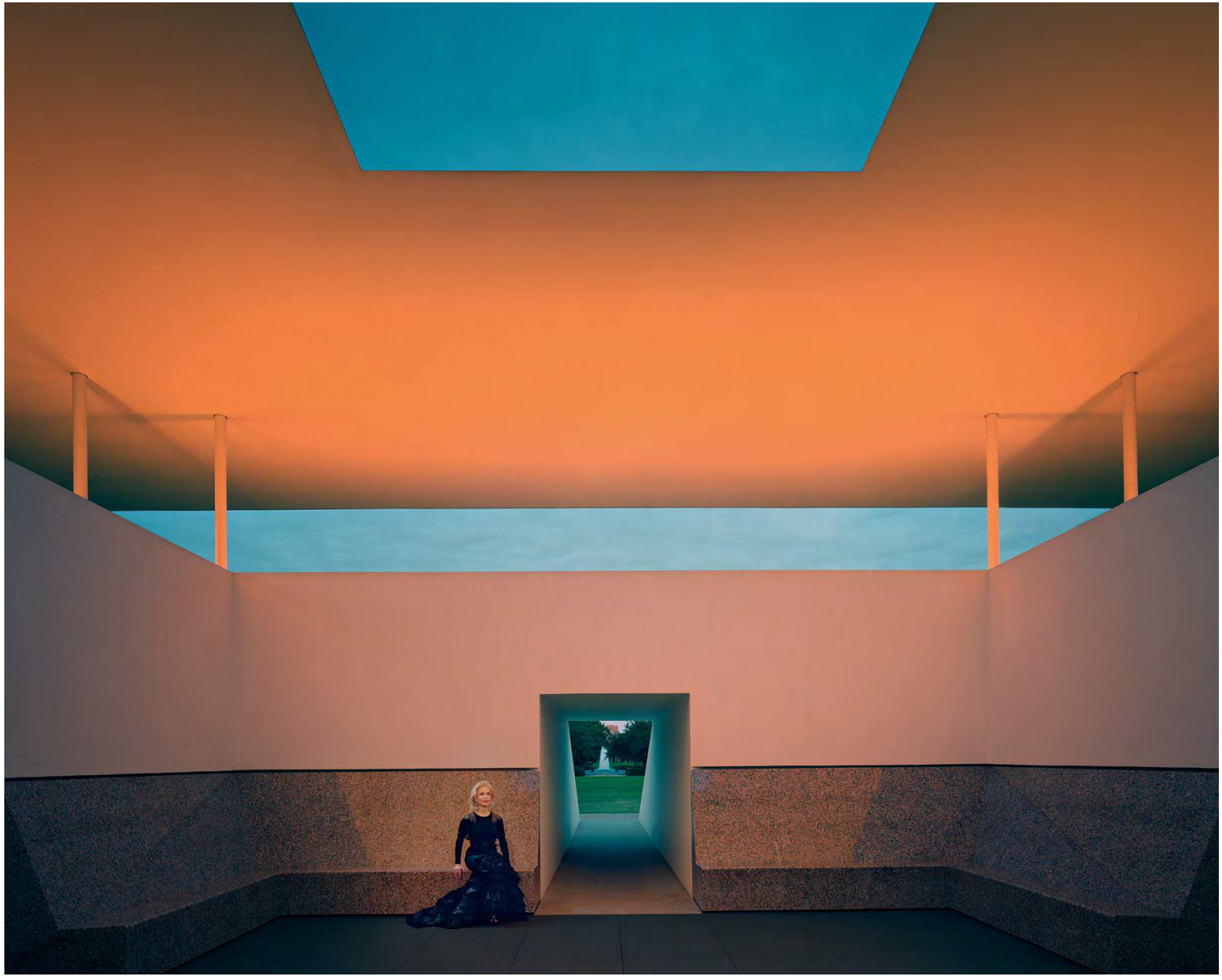
And you do.
Thank you.

1. The 'Wyatt Hyatt' played host to luminaries such as Princess Grace, Princess Margaret, Joan Collins, King Hussein and Queen Noor of Jordan, Truman Capote, The Duchess of York, Liza Minnelli, Plácido Domingo, Mick Jagger, to name but a few. The Wyatts sold the house in 1999.

2. Betty Catroux (born Betty Saint) is a former Chanel model and muse to Yves Saint Laurent (who referred to her as his female twin) and Tom Ford. In 1968, Betty Saint married French interior decorator François Catroux, one of the most respected decorators in the world, with a roster of clients that has included Rothschilds, the Shah of Iran and King Hussein of Jordan. At their wedding, she wore a black-and-white Pierre Cardin fur coat paired with patent-leather boots while the groom also broke with tradition by wearing a chocolate velvet suit with a white turtleneck.

3. The Rothko Chapel was built in Houston by Philip Johnson in 1971 for Jean and Dominique de Menil as part of the Menil Collection.

4. James Turrell's Twilight Epiphany Skyspace is a concert hall and laboratory for music school students of Rice University. Constructed of grass, concrete, stone and composite steel, the structure has an LED light sequence that projects on the ceiling at sunrise and sunset.



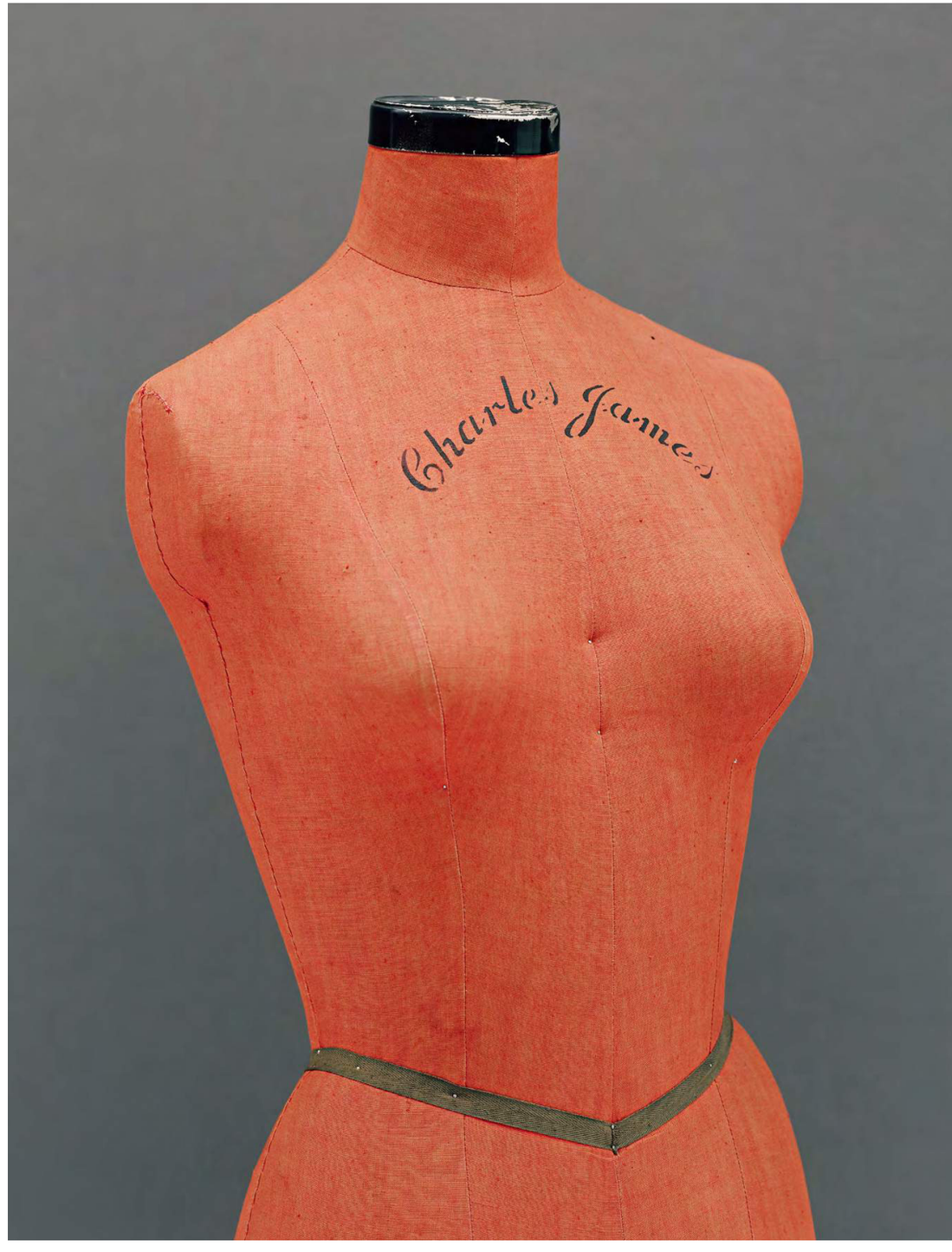
2010s
James Turrell's *Twilight Epiphany* Skyspace,
Rice University.
Black-silk ruffled skirt with jet bead-embroidered
bolero by Ralph Lauren.

Lighting: Peter Keyser.
Photo Assistant: Nathan Lindstrom.
Location Scout: Whitney Crenshaw.
Retouching by The Adrien Blanchat Company.

‘There is a fantasy that propels his mind forward.’

How the American couturier Charles James left his sumptuous mark on the de Menils.

By William Middleton
Photographs by Robert Polidori



Dominique de Menil sat with Charles James by candlelight as he painted her dressing room doors in a chequerboard pattern of cloudy pastels.

As the Franco-American art patron Dominique de Menil wrote: 'Among all the people who have a name in the art world – the movers, the doers, the poets, famous couturiers, culinary chefs; anyone, finally, who has a right to a signature – let us place a forgotten name: Charles James.' Known for his sumptuous evening gowns in icy-coloured silks and satins that had been sculpted into bold, sensual shapes, Charles James was the greatest couturier America has ever produced. In a career that began in his mother's hometown of Chicago, included important stints in London and Paris and ended in New York, James dressed the likes of Marlene Dietrich, Standard Oil heiress Millicent Rogers, social leaders such as Mrs William Randolph Hearst, Mrs Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney and Babe Paley, as well as Dominique de Menil. Christian Dior credited James as the inspiration for his famous 'New Look'. Salvador Dalí stated that his white satin, down-filled evening jacket of 1937 – now in the permanent collection of the V&A – was the first piece of soft sculpture. Balenciaga said that James had raised fashion 'from an applied art form to a pure art form'. Azzedine Alaïa, who has a significant collection of his work, has said that if he were ever to meet Charles James, he would probably just pass out.

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Despite all the accolades, the designer, however, was never able to build a viable business (he could have used the help of a Pierre Bergé, a Giancarlo Giammetti, a Bernard Arnault). Long-forgotten by the general public, James is now the subject of two major museum exhibitions. At the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum, *Charles James: Beyond Fashion* (8 May-10 August 2014) will be a complete retrospective of the designer's work. While the Menil Collection, the museum founded by Dominique de Menil, will host a more personal examination of the designer and his client with *Charles James: A Thin Wall of Air* (31 May-7 September 2014).

Dominique and John de Menil came to America from Paris in 1941, the year after Charles James settled permanently in New York. The de Menils, however, went to Houston, Texas, where the American headquarters of Schlumberger Ltd, the oil services company founded by her father (she was born Dominique Schlumberger) was based. The couple took a look around the young city, with only the thinnest cultural context, and decided to do something about it. They were invigorated by the sense of possibility in 20th-century America and the frontier spirit of Texas.[1] They quickly became art collectors and patrons, amassing over the decades some 15,000 works of art from Paleolithic bone carvings to Surrealist works by Magritte and Ernst to the great post-War American artists such as Rothko, Rauschenberg and Warhol. They always maintained a townhouse in New York, an apartment in Paris, a country house in the Oise and her family chateau in Normandy, the Val-Richer, yet they concentrated their artistic activities in Texas because they felt it was there that they were needed.

In 1987, Dominique opened the Menil Collection, a museum designed by Renzo Piano – the architect's first building in the United States and still considered his masterpiece.[2] Just as the de Menils were taking their first steps towards collecting, they met Charles James in New York. By 1947, Dominique was wearing his elegant gowns. In the next few years, as they built their house in Houston, designed by Philip Johnson, they called on James to help with the interiors.[3] In contrast to the strict, Miesian forms of the architecture – long and lean in glass, steel and brick – James produced an interior that was curved, rich and voluptuous. The de Menil house is the only interior by Charles James that is still in existence.[4]

The couple had an ongoing relationship with James as patrons and as friends. That was something of a rarity, for the designer was a notoriously difficult character. His correspondence with Cecil Beaton, who had been a friend since both were at Harrow, is filled with James' fierce accusations of personal treachery and professional betrayal, both real and imagined. When legendary New York fashion publicist Eleanor Lambert testified against James in court, she stepped off the witness stand to find him charging at her with outstretched hands going for her throat![5] The de Menils, through their long personal relationships with artists, were understanding of his behaviour. 'Great artists can be difficult, dissolute, but they are never base,' announced John de Menil, 'And in their quest for perfection they come closer to eternal truths than pious goody-goodies.' The de Menils cared most about James' talent. They acquired and donated some of his seminal works to the Brooklyn Museum,

From the bedroom of Dominique and John de Menil, looking towards the living room, with the Charles James designed *chaise longue* and a Louis XVI desk that was found for the de Menils by James.

At the de Menil house, Charles James introduced historical furnishings into the modern architecture such as this Venetian Rococo sofa covered in green satin in the entry.

In the de Menil dining room, a curvaceous banquette designed by Charles James is paired with a gilded classical mirror, a pair of matching sconces and a still life by Georges Braque, *Poisson, hûitres et pichet* (1941).

now key pieces of the collection at the Costume Institute.[6] And she wore his designs throughout her life. 'I have followed his works closely,' Dominique de Menil wrote. 'I have watched the stream of ideas that constantly flows out of his amazingly creative mind and eventually oozes throughout the fashion world. Someday that story will be written.'

To track down the tale of the singular designer and his equally distinctive clients, Susan Sutton, a curator from the Menil Collection who is organising the James exhibition, invited *System* into the de Menil house. We sat on a remarkable curved sofa by Charles James – in front of a dark grey wall with an important 1967 painting by Max Ernst, *Retour de la belle jardinière*, and vast expanses of glass opening onto tropical gardens – to talk about James and the de Menils.

Charles James said, 'I spent my entire life making fashion an art form.' In 1975, when James was the only fashion designer ever to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship, American artist Robert Motherwell said that James' drawings 'were more powerful and to the point than any of the work submitted by so-called artists – that is painters and sculptors.' His clients talked about how perfectly engineered and sculpted his works were. So, Charles James: artist, architect, sculptor, engineer or fashion designer?

All of the above! His complexity – his artistry – really comes from the fact that he was an engineer and an architect and a sculptor. And I would say a philosopher, as well. When you think about his theoretical thinking on form and shape, his exploration of how to create forms on the human body. That's really where the greatness of his work lies, in the labyrinth that he was.

How do you characterise his importance in the field of fashion?

From having worked with the materials, I would say that there is this transformative quality to his work. It has these transmutations and reimagining of what the body can do and what the body can be. There is a fantasy that propels his mind forward – that seems to be what drives his innovation and makes him such a compelling figure in the history of fashion.

He could also be a bit of a monster. Have you come across any examples?

Well, there are stories. [*Laughs*] When he was called down here to pick the colour schemes for this house, he would arrive late after all of the painters had already gone to lunch. He would then be frustrated and annoyed at everyone. It wasn't until later in the day, as all the workers were packing up to go home, that he would really start mixing colours. Daughters Adelaide and Christophe de Menil had to hold flashlights in the dark because the house didn't have electricity, while he mixed these colours and painted samples on the walls. This insistence on creating in his own time, in his own way and on his own schedule speaks to that temperamental nature.

Charles James died in 1978, in his apartment at the Hotel Chelsea, having alienated the great majority of his friends and business associates. Dominique de Menil was a friend and patron until the end – why?

I see it as part of their loyalty to art and to artists. They viewed and esteemed James as an artist, first and foremost. He was demanding in his thinking, in his approach to fashion. They showed a loyalty across the board to him. They were interested in his stunning designs, such as the 'Butterfly Dress', but they were also interested in his working process. For instance, they valued his mannequins, his pattern-making – we have 17 drawings that he created for jewellery design. He had proposed flexible sculpture to her, and we have drawings of that in the collection. He was thinking sculpturally, and they were intrigued by that. So they were interested in his full repertoire, his full process and his fullness as an artist. I think they had a huge spirit of generosity and

'Great artists can be difficult, dissolute, but in their quest for perfection they come closer to eternal truths than pious goody-goodies.' John de Menil

You are an art curator – how has it been to work for the first time on an exhibition involving fashion?

It's been a huge learning curve. The museum has never mounted a fashion or design show before. No one in the museum has had to delve into an encounter with this kind of material, so this has been invigorating. It's opened everyone's eyes – curatorially, in conservation, in exhibition design . As a curator, there is this balance between approaching these garments as art objects and as their own unique entity as fashion. As fashion, it has its own rules, its own demands that are unique and special. But at the same time, they are also art objects, so they abide by those rules and have similar demands. It has been interesting to ride that line, to have feet in both realms.

tolerance – they understood that he came as a package with all of these foibles or complexities.

Charles James said that a designer should dress the personality. What do you think the pieces he designed for Dominique de Menil have to say about her personality.
There is a certain understatement in Dominique de Menil's James collection. There is a sense of the pragmatic in the clothes, but there is also the unusual and the dramatic. The colours are rich, warm and mysterious. So many times working with the pieces we've felt like we're looking at the interior of the house or get the feeling of being in a Surrealist painting. A wonderful example is an evening gown of black velvet and satin with a brown wool-silk overskirt that becomes a bustle at the back. It is a striking combination of textures – luxurious and subdued – velvet and textured silk. And the brown, a sort of mink or milk chocolate, is surprising for eveningwear. There is a mixture of earthiness and elegance that seems to capture something of her personality. She also had a predilection for day suits, afternoon dresses and many coats. She wore many of these pieces again and again, long after they were created.

What is the idea behind the exhibition – it's not meant to be a retrospective.
Right. The story of this exhibition goes back to her meeting James, beginning to wear his clothes, commissioning his work, and then the very audacious move to bring James down here to do the interior of their house. Our look at it is very personal, studying the relationship between client and designer. We are also able to explore the thinking of a designer outside the realm of his main practice of fashion. What does James look like when he operates in the realm of space – an inhabited space, an interior? Our unique opportunity is to look at the symbiotic relationship between furniture, interior and fashion. But we are also looking at personal relationships, which is really what drove the de Menils, what created their collection, what caused them to be loyal to artists and to support them. That is also very much at the heart of the exhibition.

How did you settle on the title for the show, *Charles James: A Thin Wall of Air*?
In *The Genius of Charles James*, the catalogue for the 1982 Brooklyn Museum exhibition by Ann Coleman, there is an essay by Bill Cunningham. He describes the great designers of the day as being captivated by James' theory of a 'thin wall of air' that existed between the body and that fabric, which provided the means of transforming the wearer's body. James believed that it was one of his greatest achievements. What struck me about the phrase is that it refers to his fashion design theory, wholly unique to him, and it also manages to encompass, as James does – the idea of sculpture, engineering, architecture. Perhaps most poignantly, it is also suggestive of relationships and proximity – the closeness of the de Menils to James. It also calls to mind the beautiful tensions that exist in James' garments and those that his intervention in the house create: opacity and transparency, heaviness and lightness, richness with airiness.

Approximately how many pieces of Charles James are currently in the Menil Collection?
There are 50 garments, 51 if you include fabric that was slated for a dress. Then we have five pieces of furniture, 55 drawings, seven prints and photographs as well as one small sculpture. It's really quite a wonderful sculpture: a small piece in brass, rectangular, with this figure eight form in the middle. It's his calling card: infinity. And it is nestled within a faceted mirror, so you have this infinity form moving back on itself. It's a profound piece that speaks to his thinking: mirrors, reflections, repetitions that move a design forward.

'James' complexity - his artistry - comes from the fact that he was an engineer, an architect and a sculptor. And I would say a philosopher, as well.'

Tell me about some of the pieces in the exhibition that stand out most to you. First, eveningwear?
The first that strikes me is that black velvet and brown silk bustle dress I mentioned. The combination of muted, taupe-y brown, a woolen silk and a velvet bodice – it really reads like Dominique de Menil. There is this luxury and richness, but the bustle fabric seems quite humble to me. So it is about richness and restraint. Another of the evening pieces that really stands out is the 'Ribbon Dress', with its sleeveless, black velvet bodice and long skirt of alternating shades of satin burgundy, chocolate and pale pink. It is fetching and joyous, maybe somewhat like wearing streamers. And it has a highly unusual feature where the dress angles out below the waist and then down. She wore the gown to the opening of *Out of this World* in 1964, an exhibition of landscape paintings at University of St. Thomas in Houston. A society columnist described Dominique de Menil in this dress as, 'chic' and that she, 'dashed from picture to picture.' I can only imagine how different this dress must have been for 1964 Houston, how it would have stood out amongst other evening gowns. We also have this incredible damask evening jacket – it's this saffron colour with a lining in robin's egg blue. It calls to mind a Chinese empress. I love it for its shape and drama. And we have a photo of her wearing the jacket with Philip Johnson, from the early 1950s. He's talking into her ear and she has this big smile on her face. This triad of Dominique de Menil, Charles James and Philip Johnson that is captured in this unassuming photo really speaks to the house.

Daywear?
There is this mauve wool suit, a skirt and jacket, that I think is one of the most gorgeous daywear pieces in the collection. It has a single button at the top with a stand-up collar. The mauve colour is exquisite, and we've paired it with a rose silk blouse, while the jacket is lined with a black fur. It's simple and yet very dramatic. She gravitated to wool suits, with many variations in black. She is wearing another one in a photo here in the garden atrium, from 1952, with Max Ernst. Again, what I like about that one is the humble exterior, unassuming with some beautiful detailing with a crossover lapel and peplum, but then you open it and there is this incredible lining in pumpkin orange satin.

In April 1984, the exhibition *La rime et la raison* opened at the Grand Palais in Paris. It was the first time the world had a full look at the extent of the family's collection. Dominique appeared at the opening, flanked by François Mitterand and Jack Lang, in a Charles James suit.
That was a shorter jacket with a higher-waisted skirt. She also wore that suit with Max Ernst at a 1973 exhibition that opened here in Houston, at Rice University, pairing it then with a pair of tall black boots. So she was incredibly loyal to these pieces. The opening of *La rime et la raison* was such a huge moment for the collection – that she chose a James suit is significant. She wore it, even though it was more than 30 years old, with a real elegance. She also paired it with one of the iconic Four-Leaf-Clover Hats.

Which brings us to accessories – which stand out to you?
There are two 'Clover Hats' in the collection. One is a velvet with a braid around the perimeter. The other is a more simplified, satin version. The black velvet hat, in particular, definitely has a substance to it, a gravitas to its construction. The other is much lighter, more delicate in the way it holds its form. In terms of construction, the simpler hat is striking for its delicacy – it's ability to hold its inflated form. It speaks to his ingenuity in constructing this kind of hat. Then there are these beautiful scarves. We have a box of them. They are figure eight scarves, or propeller scarves, the form we discussed with the sculpture and are such a rich combination of colours.

Shortly after they met Charles James, the de Menils began building their house in Houston, in 1948 to 1950. Fairly early in the process, they brought in Charles James to help with the interiors. Dominique gave full credit to her husband. She said, 'John, who was always full of extraordinary, creative ideas – *dangerous* ideas – thought of inviting Charles James.' It's interesting that they had this rigorous International-Style exterior and yet, for the interior, they wanted something more sensual.
John writes that their goal in bringing James into the house was this desire for fluidity. Dominique de Menil also talked about James being the antipode to the rectilinear line. The house could have felt very bare to them, a feeling of being exposed with these large, expansive windows. This wanting to soften the house, make it more liveable. This created the possibility of injecting the curvaceousness of James into the house and pairing it with the rectilinear. The meeting of those two sensibilities, and the capacity to hold them at once in a single space is remarkable.

'His theoretical thinking on form and shape. That's where the greatness of his work lies, in the labryinth that he was.'

What are some of the James contributions to the house that most stand out to you?
The first that becomes apparent is this idea of surprises. You go to open a cabinet, and the exterior is grey or pale blue, and the interior is an apple green

'Charles had ideas that were revolutionary, to make the corridors rich and the inside of the closets interesting and the outside very pure,' Dominique de Menil explained of the house's hallway covered with brightly-coloured velvets.

'It was always doing the reverse of what was expected.' In the foreground, a painting by Henri Rousseau , *La Sainte Famille* (1905).

or pale yellow. So, you have these wonderful moments of surprise that I think are some of the most fascinating interventions in the house. This isn't something that a guest always sees; for example, many happen in Dominique de Menil's dressing room, so they are very private. They are there for the pleasure of the inhabitant. The interior, like the day suit we were discussing earlier, has these very personal moments of pleasure and delight. For me, that is the crux of the intervention in the house: moments of delight that are often very personal.

For example, that chaise longue here in the living room. It is such a beautiful, dark form, and then, underneath is that very vivid yellow.
Yes, the fabric is grey, almost matching for the sofa, you see how engineered it is, how much thought went into the curves. So it was arduous to execute. There are two others in the collection. In the exhibition, we will be showing one that is done in a sort of marine blue/turquoise mohair velvet.

How did John de Menil describe the process in his curatorial notes?
He wrote: 'Kidney-shaped sofa, original by Charles James, the making of it was a three year adventure with many tragic-comedies, in the best Charles James style. It cost us probably more than $6,000.'

What do you know about the dressing room doors?
We have a wonderful paint card where he was mixing colours for reference, the grey wall, and then underneath is this very bright yellow, almost a lemon yellow. Again, a hidden surprise.

This piece that we're sitting on, this sofa, what have you learned about this?
The idea came from the Man Ray lips—it is variously called the 'Lips Sofa' or the 'Butterfly Sofa.'[7] It was completed in 1952. From what I know, this was a trial to make. It was quite a process and was very expensive for its time. I don't think the de Menils planned it costing as much as it did, but the trials and tribulations of executing the sofa impacted the cost. Getting the upholstery right was a challenge, and I don't think James was ever satisfied. There was a lot of going back to the drawing board. It is a very complicated form, with all of these curves. When you look at the drawings and you see the pale yellow in the middle which was very close to the pale yellow that ends up in the interior of the dressing room. But I like this idea of these very cool colours, very airy, the opposite of some of his other interventions in the home. For instance, in the main hallway, in the foyer, the colours are very rich and saturated and dark and moody and dramatic. But then when you get to her dressing room, it's very airy and light and ephemeral feeling. I like that dichotomy.

It is fascinating to me how extensive his interventions were in the house. The furniture he designed, of course, and the dressing room, but then also the ceiling height, the dark grey wall, the antique piano, the dark floors, the velvets in the hallway, the Belter furniture, the 18th-century Venetian sofa and other historical elements – that's a lot.
It is. For instance here, we are looking at the piano and grey wall and the chaise longue. The colour of the upholstery is close to the colour of the wall, and so you have this blending of surfaces with, on the underbelly of the chaise longue, this bright, unexpected pop of colour. You have this covering of surfaces in such a straight-forward linear house – almost at every turn, there is a James moment, so it really is quite extensive.

The richness of the fabrics at the windows…
Again, you have this play of lightness and airiness, transparency and sort of opaque. The green silk curtains there and their capacity to reflect light and their richness in contrast to these beautiful light grey cotton shears that allow in more light. These tensions play themselves out beautifully. This is just like a James dress here. I think of the concert gown that we have in our collection. It has an organdy white underskirt and this lush rich velvet and satin overskirt – these plays of richness and lightness. You see it played out in the house very well.

'There is a fantasy that propels his mind forward – that seems to drive his innovation and makes him such a compelling figure in the history of fashion.'

By the spring of 1950, as the house was being completed, James had already made four trips to Houston. Do you know very much about his time here in Texas?
I'm still on the hunt for more information. On his first trip down, he arrived with this huge green vase that he had bought at the Armory Show in New

York. It was onerous – it was a trial even to get it to the house from the airport. But he arrived, and this was going to be his focal point of inspiration for the house. It's this very tall green opaline vase, very extravagant, with gold detailing on it. He chose a bouquet of flowers for it, white lilies from California, that was to be his inspiration for the entire project. Another moment involved the piano over there on the grey wall. This was very important to him. He wanted a piano in the house. In order to get a sense of the space – how it was going to sit in the room, how it was going to feel in the room – he constructed a mock piano out of orange crates. After he left, the de Menils couldn't find one of their suitcases. It turned out that he had built this mock piano around their piece of luggage. To me, that indicates his passion. He was so focused on his work that he buried their suitcase while dreaming up this piano.

In the last year of her life, 1997, Dominique de Menil was thinking about the idea of a Charles James exhibition.

The first mention of her desire goes back to 1995, in a biographical interview, when she said, 'We must do a Charles James show.' When the chaise longue is brought up, she says, 'Yes, it's incredible—it's reversals.' She was obviously sensitive to these plays James was making as a designer. Then, in 1997, close to her death in December, she was making notes. She recounted the story about how James came to do their interior and to tell the story of his life. Those are the only notes we have from her about the show. We might be doing it differently than she would have imagined but, considering how much Dominique and John believed in his work, I would like to think that it would have been gratifying to her.

1. John dropped the Napoleonic title of Baron and Americanised the spelling of his name. 'My mother always remained somewhat European,' eldest son Georges de Menil once told me. 'But my father loved being an American, he loved being a Texan and he loved being a Texas oilman!'

2. The de Menils built a cultural centre in Houston that includes the Rothko Chapel (1973), a non-denominational chapel with 14, monumental abstract paintings by Mark Rothk; the Menil Collection (1987); The Twombly Pavilion (1995), a permanent installation of paintings and sculptures by Cy Twombly; and Richmond Hall (1997), a site-specific light installation by Dan Flavin. The Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum (1997) housed 13th-century frescos on extended loan from Cyprus that were returned last year. The museum is currently planning to build a Menil Drawing Institute, to focus primarily on modernist drawings and works on paper.

3. Philip Johnson was furious about the de Menils' decision to hire James. 'I admire his work as a dress designer enormously, but you can imagine the disappointment of an architect when someone else finishes his work,' he wrote Dominique de Menil on 2 May 1950. Johnson was incredibly smooth, though and quickly recovered his sense of diplomacy: 'This disappointment, however, is lessened by my recognition of your incomparable good taste, so I know the house will turn out to be beautiful.'

4. The de Menil house underwent an 18-month, $3.3 million restoration that was completed in 2004. Owned by the Menil Foundation, the house is used by the museum for small events. It is closed to the public.

5. The stories of Charles James' monstrous behaviour are seemingly endless. One who worked in his atelier suggested, 'He calls it a *maison de couture,* but it's really a *maison de torture*.' When the designer had yet another falling out with a client, this one a furrier, James threatened to go to his showroom and open a jar of moths! And yet, there was a method to his madness: producing brilliant work. 'Charles James has the courage and devotion to look for the difficult solution,' John de Menil said succinctly. Even at his most demanding, James often had a point. When the de Menils suggested a good friend to work in his studio, James didn't hesitate to criticise her performance. 'She started at the beginning making lots of paper records, which was right, but then neither referring to them nor using them, which was wrong,' James wrote Dominique de Menil in 1952. 'Workroom records are made so that they can be referred to constantly. Doing so is using the mind. Not doing so is to be a servant. The only reason for paper work is to be able to rise above the level of an *ouvrière* by making use of one's records and recollections. It is an act of a servant to take three or four days to organise and collect dresses for a *Vogue* photograph, and then to say, 'What is *Vogue*?'

6. One of James' most legendary creations, the 'Butterfly Dress,' was given by the de Menils to the Brooklyn Museum. The tightly-fitted bustle dress, in chocolate and champagne silk, weighs 18 pounds and features a dramatic train that requires 25 yards of tulle. Other important de Menil gifts include James' famous 'Diamond Dress,' a geometric evening gown in taupe, ivory and black silk, and a 'Pouff Dress,' in black silk. Many of the de Menil gifts are expected to have starring roles in the exhibition at the Costume Institute.

7. *A l'heure de l'observatoire, les Amoureux* (1932) was Man Ray's painting of the scarlet lips of his departed lover, Lee Miller, floating in the sky. It is one of Man Ray's most famous works and a seminal Surrealist painting.

Photograph courtesy of the Menil Collection

Portrait of Charles James by Cecil Beaton from 1929, taken in New York after both had driven from Chicago in the designer's Pierce-Arrow. Inscribed to the de Menils: 'So many years later with much love always to both of you but specially to you Dominique, Charlie.'

Full-length evening coat in black satin with red lining
in the conservation department of the Menil Collection.

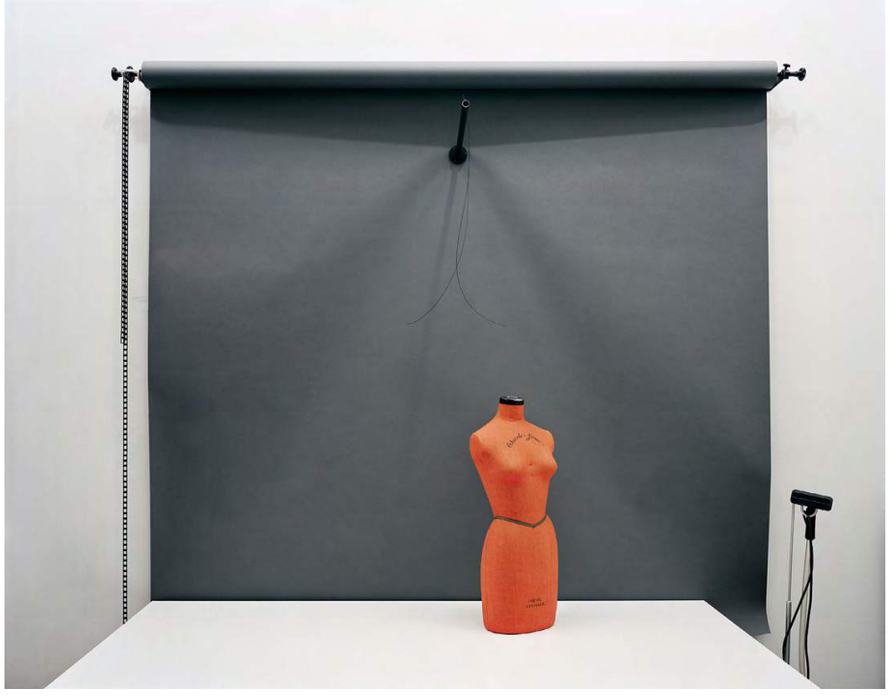
Cape in red fleece in the framing department
of the Menil Collection, next to *La clef de verre*
by René Magritte from 1959.

Bolero day jacket in white cotton piqué lined with white silk
in the conservation department of the Menil Collection.

'Infanta' cocktail dress in chocolate silk from 1953
in the conservation department of the Menil Collection.

Mauve wool suit, with fur-lined jacket, paired with long-sleeve blouse in rose silk in the conservation department of the Menil Collection.

Archival storage boxes containing some of the 50 Charles James garments owned by Dominique de Menil, in the conservation department of the Menil Collection.



Charles James' dress form for
Dominique de Menil from 1950.

Camel day coat/coat dress from 1947, in front of a shipping
crate on the loading dock of the Menil Collection.

Opera coat in historic saffron damask silk, likely 19th century upholstery fabric, lined in ice blue satin from 1948 in the conservation department of the Menil Collection.

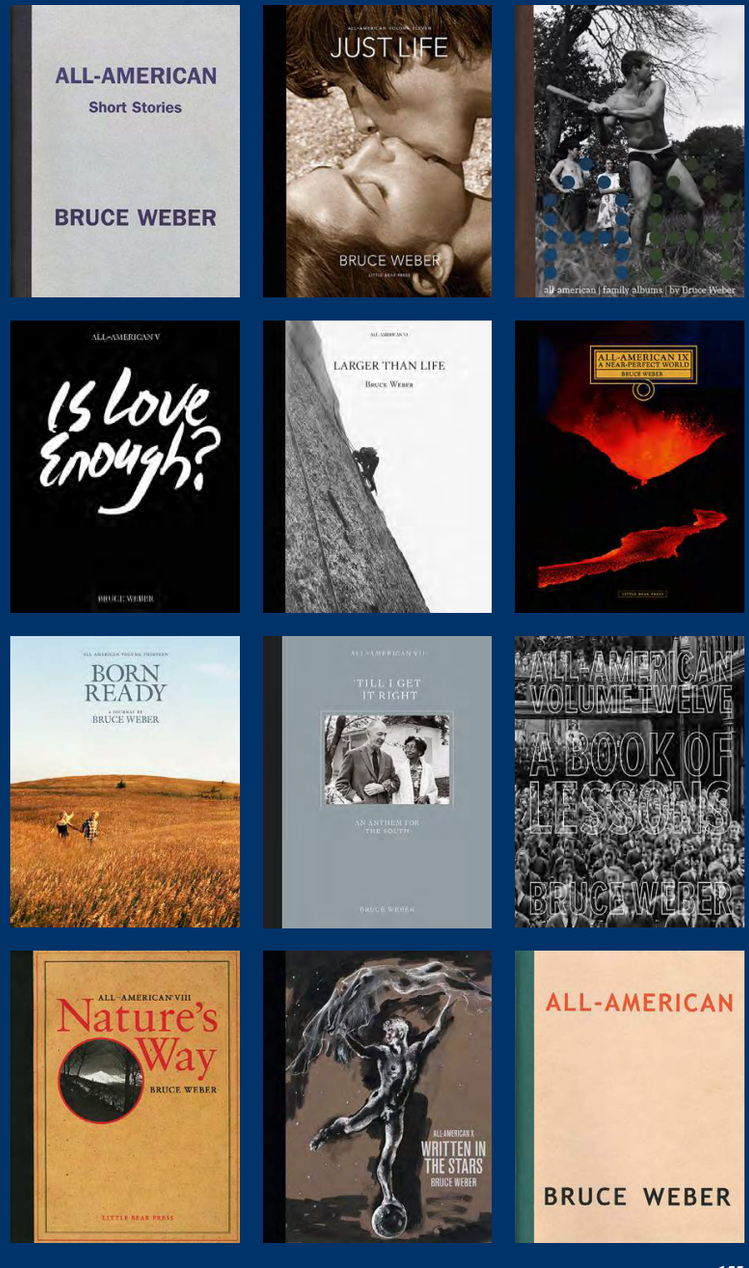
Lighting Technician: Peter Keyser. Retouching by The Adrien Blanchat Company.

‘Cloverleaf’ hat in black satin from 1948

‘These things sometimes mean more than any exhibition at a museum or gallery.’

Bruce Weber on the journey of *All-American*.

Curated by Dennis Freedman



All are welcome – painters and mountaineers, mystics and poets, ranchers and socialites, bombshells and Philistines, soldiers and activists, upstarts and old-timers – provided their stories lift the spirit, inspire the mind or provoke a new way of seeing the world. This engaging, democratic impulse is the through line for a series of art journals titled *All-American*, which the photographer and filmmaker Bruce Weber and his partner Nan Bush have been putting together for the past 13 years. Together with a small team, Bruce and Nan have set forth an eclectic, ever-evolving compendium of the American vernacular, an inquisitive take on overlooked aspects of the culture and lesser-known characters of note.

In many ways, the *All-American* series is a natural extension of Bruce's work. The books share a similar emotional tenor and variety of content. As with his editorials and films, the structure is characterised by unexpected juxtapositions and diverse historical and cultural references. There is also a playful sense of freedom running through the series, the result of Bruce and Nan setting the editorial agenda on their own terms.

All-American was originally conceived in 2001 as a notebook-style compilation of the stories Bruce and Nan would tell their friends after months on the road. In the first two editions, Bruce's photo-essays played a prominent role. But even in its earliest iterations, *All-American* referenced the past through generous incorporation of archival photographs from a variety of sources. Their motive for doing so was also partially a function of timing. As Bruce describes it, 'For anyone who lived in America through 9/11, our sense of the past was abruptly changed. People in Europe and other parts of the world have a more present sense of life during times of conflict. The events of September 11th caused me to think about the past in a different way, more as a time of innocence.'

As the years progressed, the scope of *All-American* expanded to include more stories dedicated to artists, writers and photographers whom Bruce and Nan wanted to celebrate. The sense of creative reference and personal narrative in these books can be traced to Bruce's experiences as a child growing up in western Pennsylvania: 'The first images that had a lasting impact on me were the snapshots of my mom and dad that hung all over our house. They were a strikingly handsome couple – my dad always had his shirt off and would carry my mom around the garden full of tulips.' Profiles in *All-American* often draw from the personal archives of the subjects, giving each story a feeling of familiarity and intimacy not often found in art publications. The choice of subjects – with ample space and attention given to stories of everyday people in unique circumstances – also springs from one of Bruce's formative artistic experiences: 'As a young teenager, my mom and dad would drive me to Pittsburgh every Sunday to see foreign films at the Guild Theatre, which was right next door to Weinstein's Deli (no relation to Harvey). I don't know what my life would be like today without those films by Bergman and Antonioni, Fellini and Visconti.' Though undeniably American, these books share a populist bent with the Italian neo-realists who inspired from early on.

In the latest edition, *All-American Volume Thirteen: Born Ready*, Bruce and Nan have continued to use the journal as a platform to showcase the work of young artists. Recent commissions by photographers like Deanna Templeton, John Scott, Sean Thomas and Poppy de Villeneuve have taken *All-American* in exciting and unexpected directions, while maintaining its essentially hopeful, humanist focus. In the following portfolio of images, selected by Dennis Freedman from volumes throughout the series, Bruce shares anecdotes from his perspective as editor.

All-American V: Is Love Enough?
Kevin Small and Cotton Eye,
Pro Rodeo Cowboys Association,
Tucson, Arizona, 1989.
Photo by Louise Serpa

All-American: Short Stories
Sugar and friends in Elizabeth's backyard,
Bel Air, California, 2002.
Photo by Bruce Weber

"Elizabeth Taylor kept all these director's chairs from her various films in the backyard of her home in Bel Air. In the middle sits Sugar, one of her favourite dogs, holding court. But that black cat on the right is a bit like Elizabeth, who had a mind of her own. I was so sad when these chairs went up for auction at Christie's after her passing. Her dogs and cats really miss hanging out in them but not as much as they miss her."

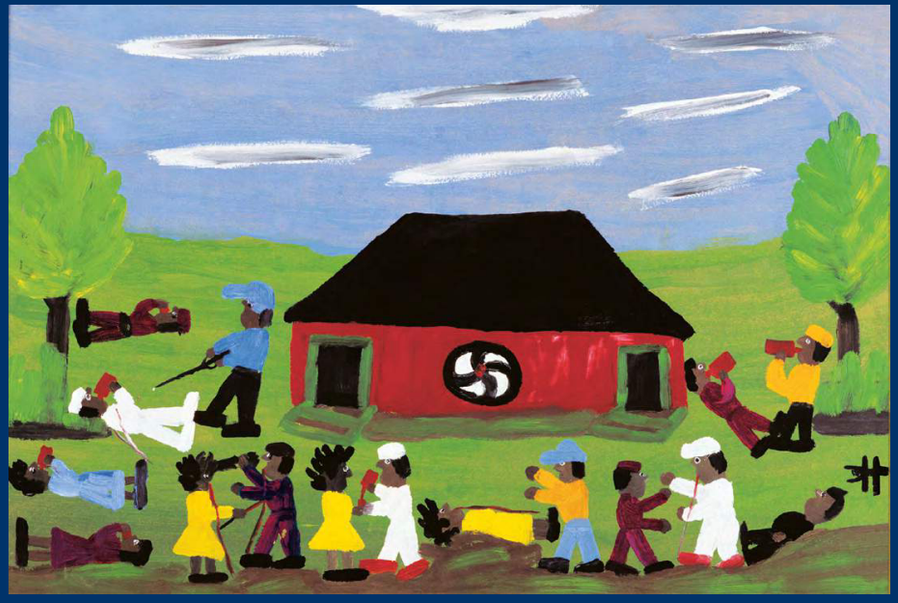
All-American IV: Otherworldly
Mary McGrory celebrates her Pulitzer Prize award,
Washington DC, 1975.
Photo by Bernie Boston

"Some of our greatest heroes are the journalists from newspapers and magazines who live on the road like we photographers do. They are so curious, always searching for and reporting on the ideas and events that will make a story big. One of our favourites was Mary McGrory, who in this photograph had just won the Pulitzer Prize for her reporting on the Watergate scandal for *The Washington Star*. I can imagine how she felt, with all those bottles of champagne – as I look at the most recent issue of *All-American*, I'm wondering if maybe we should all start drinking again."

All-American V: Is Love Enough?
Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms, CA, 2005.
Photo by Bruce Weber

All-American
True at Camp Longwood, Adirondack Park, New York, 2001.
Photo by Bruce Weber

"We were in the middle of working on our first edition of *All-American* and were of course very insecure, as we still are today. Nan and I had just gotten an extraordinary new puppy and named him True Blue. I took this photograph at our place in the Adirondacks – Camp Longwood on Spitfire Lake. True had just come in from a swim, and as he sat there wrapped in the towel, his whiskers almost looked like a beard. I could picture what he would look like if he were an old man. That's the great thing about dogs – they so often resemble the people they live with."



All-American VII: 'Till I Get It Right
***Saturday Night* Painting by Clementine Hunter.**
Courtesy of The Ann and Jack Brittain Family Collection

"The story of Clementine Hunter and her paintings taught us a lesson – sometimes you have to have the courage to choose a subject not knowing if the story will live up to what you hope it will be. Clementine gave us faith in our decisions as editors from that point on. Her paintings evoke the title of the seventh volume of *All-American: 'Till I Get It Right*. Clementine painted in that naïve style of Grandma Moses yet told her own story of life down south. I wish I'd had a chance to meet her."

All-American VI: Larger Than Life
Heidelberg Project, Detroit, MI, 2006.
Photo by Bruce Weber

"I went to Detroit for the first time in 2006 with Dennis Freedman to do a story with Kate Moss for *W*. When we would pass by this house, we'd just smile and wish we lived there. It's part of the Heidelberg Project, a group of abandoned buildings that has been redeveloped as a community art project. We chose this photograph as one of the opening images for *All-American* that year because it says a lot about hope. You could just tell that someone with a great sense of humour once lived there."

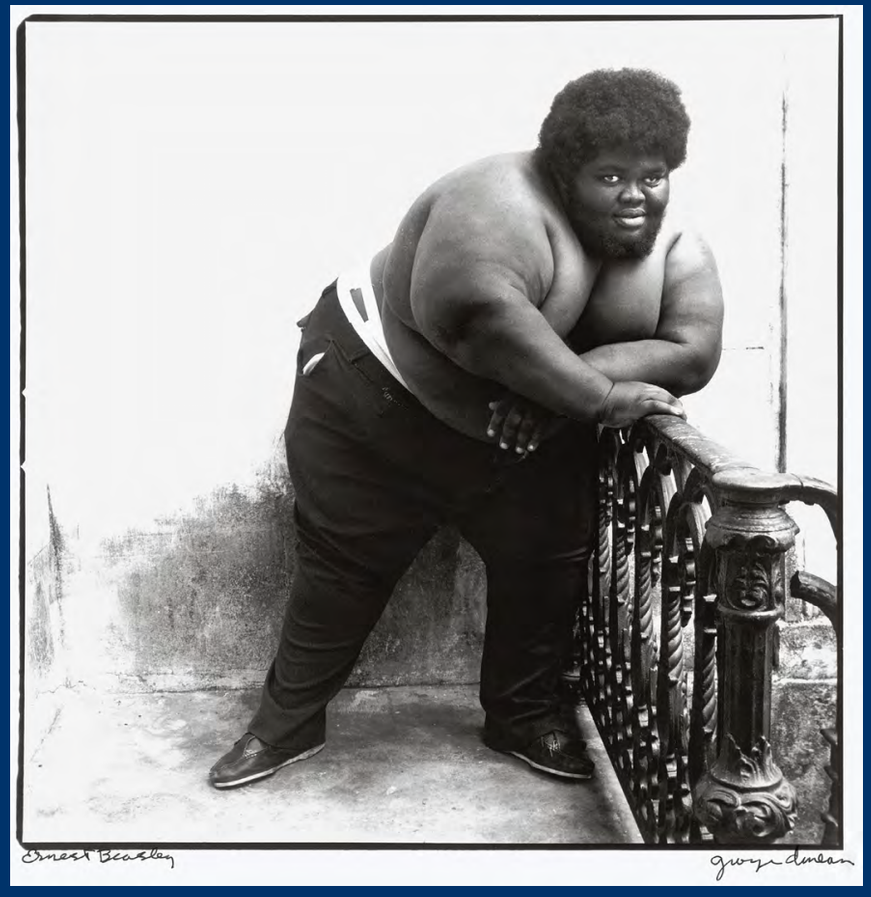
All-American VII: 'Till I Get It Right
On the way to the Martin Luther King Jr Day Parade, Liberty City, Florida, 2007.
Photo by Bruce Weber

"Liberty City is a small town west of Miami that celebrates Martin Luther King Jr Day with a huge parade. This photograph reminds me of those wonderful pictures of Diana Ross and the Supremes when they returned from Paris and paraded around the projects in Detroit wearing Dior. These ladies have lots of pride and attitude, and they sure got our attention."

All-American VI: Larger Than Life
Burt and Susie Todd wearing traditional garb, Bhutan, 1955.
Courtesy of the Todd Family Collection

All-American VIII: Nature's Way
Huandoy Massif, Peru, 1964.
Photo by Henry Kendall Archive

"We discovered William Kendall's photographs while researching images of the great mountaineers, Gary Hemming and John Harlin. Kendall was a larger-than-life character – a physics professor at MIT, a Nobel Prize winner, a dedicated environmentalist and an avid climber and deep-sea diver. His photograph of an oncoming storm in the Andes of Peru epitomizes his quest of always taking the high road."



All-American Volume VII: 'Till I Get It Right
Ernest Beasley, New Orleans, Louisiana.
Photo by George Dureau

"George Dureau, the New Orleans-based photographer, met me barefoot in front of his townhouse on Bienville Street in the French Quarter. He asked with his polite Southern drawl, 'Are you sure you want to climb up all these stairs to see my photographs and paintings?' Everything he showed us was accompanied by an eccentric 45-minute anecdote. When George showed us this photograph of Ernest Beasley, he told us about taking him watch to a wrestling competition. Ernest bought along this young boy who was always hanging out with him and always carried a needle and thread. We asked why the boy had tailoring tools, and George said, 'Why, every time Ernest sat down, his pants would rip, and that boy would sew them back up.' You can only hear this kind of story in New Orleans."

All-American Volume Twelve: A Book of Lessons
Bo Derek, Lake Powell, Utah, 1979.
Photo by John Derek, courtesy of Bo Derek

"For last year's issue, Bo Derek shared a series of photographs taken by her late husband John during a weekend getaway at Lake Powell, Utah. With the glove on her hand, this was from a group of pictures John took of Bo windsurfing in the nude. John always took pictures of the women he loved, and they often ended up in *Playboy* because the ladies often didn't have any clothes on. Towards the end of his life, when John got sick, Bo and his other previous wives – Linda Evans and Ursula Andress – all sat together on his bed to let him know how much he was loved. I think both John and Bo have a lot to be thankful for in this photograph."

All-American Volume Eleven: Just Life
Paula McKinley and Betsy Kelson,
Arlington National Cemetery, Washington DC, 2011.
Photo by Bruce Weber

"I visited Arlington National Cemetery the day after we photographed at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. As we drove into the cemetery, I met these lovely ladies who are part of a group called the Arlington Women. They attend funeral services at the cemetery as representatives of the various branches of the military and stand with grieving families who have lost their sons or daughters to the war. There are times when a family does not have enough money to attend the service in Washington DC, so these volunteers attend their services so that no one is buried alone. They are an incredibly kind and generous group of women."

All-American Volume Twelve: A Book of Lessons
Nile Rodgers, New York City, 2012.
Photo by Bruce Weber

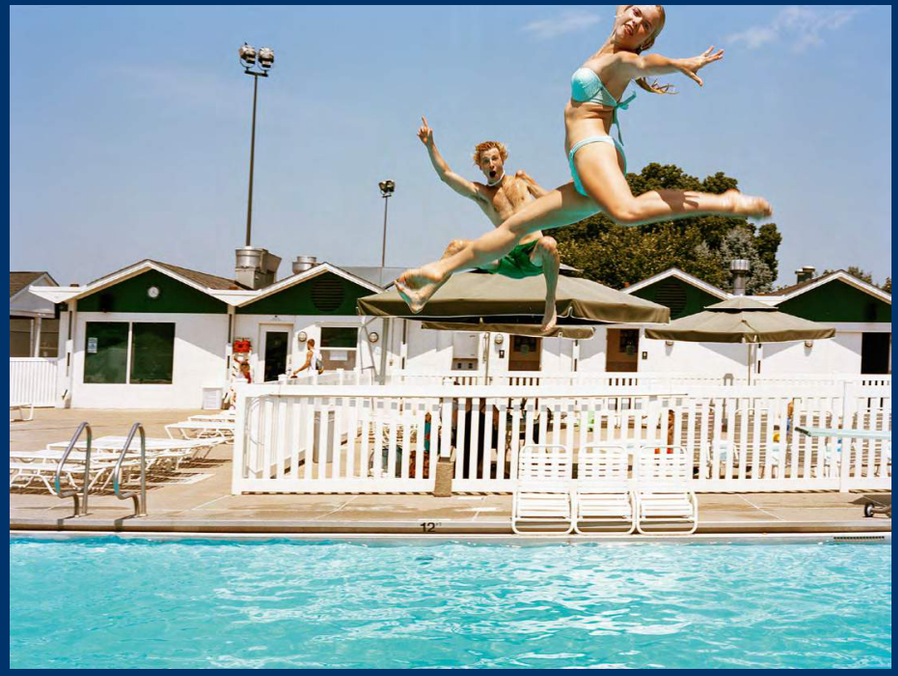
"For this story, Nile Rodgers – the talented musician and producer – invited us to his very elegant and eclectic apartment on the Upper West Side. Nile's innovative arrangements for Madonna, David Bowie and Diana Ross are only half of his story. He wrote a bestselling autobiography that could so easily be adapted into a musical on Broadway or a top-10 movie. Nile is the essence of soul, and his generosity of spirit in helping young people around the world is unsurpassed. This photo was taken a couple of months before the Daft Punk album *Random Access Memories* came out, which has created a whole new generation of Nile fans. It's fitting that in this photo, Nile's wearing a cape from the same store in Madrid that made them for Picasso."

All-American Volume Thirteen: Born Ready
Southwick Motocross Race,
Southwick, Massachusetts, 2013.
Photo by John Scott

"We chose motocross as our sport for our 13th issue because so many small towns in America have a track or an event. It's a real family-oriented sport. John Scott's photograph resonates the thrill of being 'born ready' for anything and willing to take it on. I always loved that idea, in photographs that deal with sports, politics or even fashion."

All-American Volume Thirteen: Born Ready
Frank and Nicole at Tiny's,
Louisville, Nebraska, 2013.
Photos by Sean Thomas

"These days, stories in magazines and journals – be they news or fashion – are so *short*. There's so little space to go in-depth. I wanted do something different with *All-American*, to assign stories in the spirit of the great *Life* magazine editorials, like W Eugene Smith's photographs of Albert Schweitzer in West Africa or his images of the country doctor in Colorado. Those stories have lived on all these years in the minds of the people who discovered



All-American Volume Thirteen: Born Ready
Frank and Nicole at the Happy Hollow Country Club,
Omaha, Nebraska, 2013.
Photos by Sean Thomas

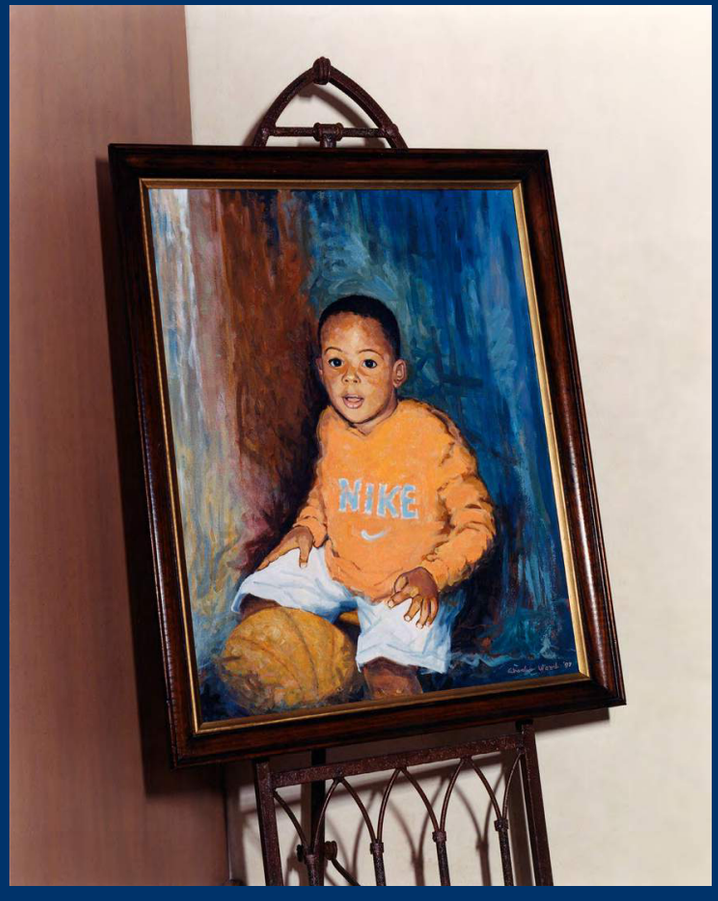
them in their homes because they had the luxury of space. This year, we decided to hire Sean Thomas to return to his hometown of Omaha, Nebraska to photograph the senior prom. In seeing the pictures he brought back, I couldn't help but think of *Farm Boy*, a book by Archie Lieberman that I've always admired."

All-American Volume Twelve: A Book of Lessons
Danny Trejo, Arleta, California, 2012.
Photo by Bruce Weber

"Danny Trejo is one of our favorite actors – his new film with Robert Rodriguez, *Machete Kills* just came out. I took this portrait with his family last spring at their home in Arleta, California, just outside of LA. His beloved mother just recently passed away, and at her funeral, the photographs we took that day were prominently displayed. Those kinds of things sometime mean more for a photographer than any exhibition at a museum or gallery."

All-American V: Is Love Enough?
Tom Frost, Gary Hemming, Stuart Fulton and John Harlin II above the Mer de Glace Glacier, Chamonix, France 1963.
Courtesy of John Harlin III

All-American: Family Albums
Kelly's Boys, Filming A Letter To True, Davie, Florida, 2003.
Photo by Bruce Weber



All-American VI: Larger Than Life
Portrait of Trey Mourning, Miami, Florida, 2006.
Photo by Bruce Weber

"This is a painting of Trey Mourning, the son of Tracy and Alonzo Mourning. Tracy is a prominent philanthropist for education, and Alonzo is one of the greatest basketball players of all time – he used to play for the Miami Heat. I had never seen a painted portrait of a child like this – I thought it was interesting that the Nike sweatshirt had become the modern-day alternative to a tie and jacket."

‘I’m a modernist. I look forward, I don’t want to be limited by the past.’

The personal archive of style icon Melanie Ward.

By Jo-Ann Furniss
Styling by Melanie Ward
Portrait by Daniel Jackson
Photographs by Glen Luchford

‘I don’t have an archive in the traditional sense, I have curated a rather large and ever burgeoning collection of vintage and contemporary clothing that I wear or have worn. I love clothing and accessories that have integrity. I developed an inherent sense of indulgence for fashion at a very young age facilitated by my mother, Honor. I have always responded more to certain dress codes from the street and music sub and counter cultures. That just felt more authentic with more spirit and soul. I believe that the street, fashion and music are inextricably linked. I personally tend to gravitate towards a certain code of dress and I instinctively continue to explore all of the possibilities of that style both personally and professionally.

Personal style has always been more defining and seductive for me than seasonal fleeting fashion dictates. Everything starts from an attitude, an allure, a confident, strong sense of self. It is less what you wear than how you wear it that constitutes style. Proportions and gesture define modernity for me and give a fresh attitude. While I am an exponent of the masculine, the androgynous, the utilitarian in all of its timeless simplicity and rigour, I also gravitate equally towards the undone, the sensual imperfection of the flou, the bohemian, the exotic.

When I began working in the fashion industry it was very instinctual. It was all about creativity, making clothes and customising vintage pieces. I have always possessed a certain irreverence towards clothes and I am never afraid to just rip into something with a pair of scissors. I personally love vintage clothing for its individuality, but you can’t build the future by looking back, it is extremely limiting. I can be inspired by the romantic notion of nostalgia but it only works for me professionally if I make it my own. To partially quote Nietzsche “... no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself.”’

– Melanie Ward

‘You can’t build the future by looking back,’ says Melanie Ward. Although that maxim might be personally true for the stylist and reflects how she perceives her role in image-making, looking back at her ‘archive’ of clothing today – and the fact she does not like to call it an archive – and on her approach to making an image through an idea of character and personal style, it is a lesson that many in the fashion industry could take on board. It is an idea of living in the moment that visually, somehow, transcends time and space and gives Melanie Ward’s fashion images a timeless quality, a paradoxical quality of now no matter when they were shot, documented or originally witnessed. Something that is extremely rare in fashion, which is of course one of the defining measures of time and the moment.

To credit a stylist with an equal share, or sometimes even the lion’s share, of the image-making process is not really the done thing in fashion with its strict hierarchies and codes of creativity – and these are codes that Melanie Ward herself adheres to. But from being a teenager at the beginning of the 1990s, when I personally first became aware of Melanie Ward’s work through the pages of magazines like *The Face*, I can’t help but credit her in that way. The images she has worked on have a magic like nobody else’s for me, they generated an impression that has never quite left. Her fashion images, still so fresh and alive, have been a constant inspiration for my professional life – even though I am not a stylist. They are one of the benchmarks by which everything else is measured: how to achieve an attitude, a feeling, a resonance and an emotion through fashion, no matter what medium you may work in to convey it.

An idea of being anti-nostalgic might seem the opposite to achieving certain aims for Ward, but it is in fact the key. The constant, easy existence of a filtered past on the internet seems to encourage nostalgia. The worry of all that bombardment of information means that people find it impossible to create something that is new, or even looks new, not just in fashion but in many spheres that fashion has found integral to its existence. Instead there now exists a sort of meta-fashion, constantly consuming its own images and designs and never looking further than its boundaries. What Ward has done and continues to do is to believe in something beyond this meta-fashion. And this is in spite her being, as she puts it, ‘quite in love with the internet’.

Melanie Ward has the good fortune – or the extremely bad fortune – to have come to prominence as part of a generation whose work existed almost wholly in print and on the catwalk for the first ten years. These years were not and have not been extensively digitally documented. It gives this period of work a dream-like quality that exists on in the imagination for people who were paying attention to magazines at the time. At the same time it is a great shame that a younger, digital generation can only experience this work in fits and starts through books and the odd, scanned vintage magazine. It was an incredibly special period in fashion, of real significance: of the rise of Helmut Lang, David Sims, Corrine Day, Kate Moss… With all of whom Ward has shared defining working relationships. And yet this lack of digital documentation suits the ephemeral nature of styling. That tug between the ephemeral and the permanent in fashion always feels significant. It is why many of us work in the industry; it is almost the very definition of the moment.

This period of time also felt very special for its widespread, genuine lack of ‘commercial concerns’. To work in the fashion industry still felt like a job for people who did not want a job and perhaps here is where the conversation with Melanie Ward should begin. We begin with the quintessentially British years and move on to her years in America, where she lives now, although this conversation takes place in Milan, where she commutes to work. She describes her work best in her own words. As she puts it:

‘Everything started for Dave [Sims], Corrine, Kate, myself, et al in that we totally lived in the moment. There were no grand plans apart from collaborating on great images and being creative. Interestingly enough it is how I still try to live my life. I am super conscious of it these days. So many people nowadays start in the business with an end goal in mind, ie, to be rich or famous. They forget the journey of self-discovery; to carve their own path through experiences and experimentation, getting to know who they are and being true to themselves. I really do try to remain centred on the here and now. If you don’t live in the now you almost give up your power to create. Practicing this is a very liberating experience. It is freeing because you are not stuck in the confines of the past or uncertainty of the future.’

How did your life in the fashion industry begin?

I just drifted into fashion in a weird way; it is almost strange to think that what I’ve done has had an influence on people. I was always passionate about clothes; I was always making things, sewing and customising vintage pieces. I went to university in London and I did a degree in languages and politics – and I was constantly making clothes when I was there. It was a twin life, like Sartre meets Portobello Market! I thought I was going to change the world. I thought I’d be a diplomat. And really it turned out you have to be a diplomat in fashion. We were all going out all of the time and somebody came up to me at a party, I was wearing a man’s jacket that I had customised, I had made it into this mini dress. This person asked me where I had bought it and I told them, then they just asked me to do some styling for them. I did not really know what styling was so I took things from my closet and my mum’s closet – she always had so many incredible clothes – and I turned up with them. I was paid such a ton of money for this day of styling, it was a hair or beauty job – well it felt like a ton of money for me then – I thought, this is easy! When I graduated from university, I was doing all sorts of disparate things. I was writing in French, I was showroom modelling, I was trying to pay my way through Saint Martin’s – I attended a fashion course for a year.

When did the break though into editorial work really come for you? When did you meet your peer group that has in so many ways has defined what you do?

It all happened very quickly. I met Dave and Corrine in 1989, and that was when my first story was published in *The Face*. It was a ‘suburban space’ story with Nigel Shafran. Nigel and I used to work from where he lived in Golders Green. I used to drive round in my Triumph Herald, and we’d go to shopping centres and ask people to wear things. So I’d get some leopard coat from a big fashion house and ask a little old lady to wear it with her own clothes. We were always doing these projects. I loved that side of dressing people up and documenting things…

But still making sure people were their own selves…

Completely. It was always human, but an extravagant version of reality. Nigel has just brought out our *Teenage Precinct Shoppers* shoot as a little book. That shoot always obsessed Raf Simons. Nigel’s a genius and a nightmare! He never really wanted to do fashion – and never did really. He’s a giant talent.

I suppose it is really like a family, all of your peer group. You have all worked

‘I have always possessed a certain irreverence towards clothes and I am never afraid to just rip into something with a pair of scissors.’

‘So many people nowadays start in the business with an end goal in mind - to be rich or famous. They forget the journey of self-discovery. ’

together for many years, from when you were first starting out and very young.
Yes, it's impossible to choose between them and what they do and what they did. There's also Dave, Glen, Corrine, Mario… I was discussing this with Mario Sorrenti not long ago. I think I was there when Mario met Kate; we are all like brothers and sisters. We all used to live in London together. We still all see each other all of the time.

I saw these relationships play out through the pages of magazines when I didn't know any of you, through your images when you were all starting out. Some who only really know the later work and where all of your careers had progressed to by that point, could think that this is some sort of blockbuster alliance.

'We were writing our own rules and functioning outside of the fashion industry. We were completely out of the system - nobody wanted to touch us. '

I think we are all incredibly grounded and normal, it isn't blockbuster in the slightest! I suppose people assume various things about us as a group, but information isn't really knowledge. We have this whole history together, like a family. It was an idea of defining a world for me with all of them.

How do you define yourself through clothing and what you do? What do you think are your signatures?
Mario Sorrenti once said to me, 'Everyone thinks you're a minimalist.' We got in to a bit of a fight about it – he's like my brother. I said, 'I'm not a minimalist. I've never been a minimalist!' I think I am more a modernist; I try and look forward. I don't want to be limited too much by the past. I have been told my work is seductive, and that resonates with me. My main aim in life is always to go forward, so it is very hard for me to go back. That's why doing a project like this is quite unusual, to look back at my old clothes. But it is always interesting to try and define a world. There is this weird, girly part of me that loves long gowns, but I think it is how you wear them that counts, you have to wear them with some irreverence. Then this other part of me loves menswear, because it is more about style rather than fashion, it's more timeless. I suppose it is the attitude with which you wear clothes that matters most to me.

I always think of you appropriating certain distinctive clothes and making them your own in the images you have produced, like John Lewis school uniforms…
I used to hang out in John Lewis' schoolboy department. I used to buy little grey suits because that's what fitted me and I liked the boyish proportions. I then used to shoot them on Rose or Kate or on Emma Balfour if I was with Dave. And, of course, there were all the amazing boys we shot too. I used to have to wait to make sure no 13-year-old schoolboys were around; I'd quickly have to duck into the changing rooms and try things on. Then there were the sex shops. After grunge, Dave and I particularly moved into this other territory, he was really experimental with his light, and I was going a lot to sex shops to find clothes. In sex shops there would always be these great PVC pants, there would be these amazing rubber straps where you could make a belt or a top by wrapping them round. It wasn't so much a bondage thing; it was just some different cool styling thing. Or there would be the idea of putting some ridiculous thing on a guy, like a pair of Speedos with a lace top and then Dave would photograph that. I think I almost went straight from John Lewis to the sex shops! I remember trailing round sex shops in Pigalle in Paris, and I tell you, I saw some sights. I was always on a crazy hunt in some weird or banal place just for something to photograph.

But your styling has this uncanny knack of never looking like it is trying too hard…
For me it always is this effortless thing, the concept of an effortless way of dressing. Your clothes don't wear you; they should never scream fashion too loud. That's what I find really modern. When we started the grunge movement – as it's called – I wanted for the kids to look a certain way… I say kids although we were all similar ages, it was dressing up people, but these are things we were also dressing in ourselves. It was easy; it was like putting on your clothes and going out. And that is still really my approach now. I suppose this has become the norm now.

I think what you did was to define an idea of a character in a fashion shoot, who you photographed mattered as much as the clothes. There was a sense of equality between everyone, male and female, subject and object; you couldn't really pull any of that apart.
I suppose what we were doing was weirdly voyeuristic, particularly for Dave and me. We were staging it clearly, but there was a sense of voyeurism. And I suppose that was true of the work I did with Corrine too, although there we had the beautiful Kate. Kate's beauty was more tangible I suppose. She is the most beautiful creature ever and the most amazing model and actress ever. Maybe she wasn't the height of an Amazon and had slightly imperfect teeth, she also had this incredible personality as well as that beauty.

She also had a personal style of her own. In many ways it was the idea that any of you could have been the stylist, any of you could have been the photographer and any of you could have been the model, particularly with yourself, Corrine and Kate.
We really were living this life. I was talking about this with Glen Luchford recently. We were all at this party together, and he was documenting it. Glen was really mixing drinks and it all got very bad, to the point where all three of us needed to vomit at the same time. I had been going a lot to see John Galliano with Kate and hanging out with him, and I remember all three of us had these maxi skirts from John. We all literally jumped up at the same time, tripped up over each other's maxi skirts and ran to the bathroom. One of us threw up in the toilet, one in the sink and one through the open window. We were like these three little peas in a pod. Kate is like my little sister, she always was, and she always will be.

I think that is something you feel in those early photographs, a sense of true camaraderie and equality.
It was a real lifestyle; there was a sense of something happening that was authentic in those photographs.

Many people seem to have stopped trying to build a world in photographs and have become too busy maintaining a fictitious lifestyle. Of course there are exceptions…
I say the word authentic over and over again. When somebody is not trying to play at being who he or she is, it is authentic. Being true to yourself is what matters. Being true to yourself, being comfortable in your own skin is important. I was discussing the idea of ego with somebody and they'd decided having some ego is important because you know who you are, can protect yourself with it and draw boundaries. But sometimes – and I know I always try and see the good side of things and that is annoying for people, like I'll always see a murder from a murderers point of view as well! – I just feel that if you are true to yourself and control your ego things are different. There are a lot of egos in this business, and if that ego is coming from a place of insecurity, it is almost like a false pride.

'Nowadays as a stylist or editor, it is more limiting. People aren't looking for a point of view from the stylist: they are looking for you to shoot look 17. '

How did you feel when you really entered the fashion industry, by going to *Harper's Bazaar* in America in the mid-1990s?
I had absolutely no interest in America at first. It was not a place that appealed to me at all. I have never been a great planner, I just always go with my gut, always have, always will. Decisions I make come from an emotional place. I feel that things always just come into my life, and that is true of all the people I started out with. We were not following this dream to become successful, or wealthy or move to America, to buy an apartment or just buy things. We were just having the best time expressing ourselves and doing what we felt. We were essentially writing our own rules and functioning outside of the fashion industry. We were not accepted by the industry, apart from Ronnie Cooke Newhouse, or Ronnie Cooke, as she was known then, before she married Jonathan. Ronnie discovered us very early on, and she told Calvin Klein about us. But it was a time when we were kids experimenting. We were completely out of the system, working with bands – because nobody in the fashion industry wanted to touch us – and we weren't doing it to revolt, we were just having fun. We were playing and expressing ourselves and having the best fun ever. Now, maybe, people think that you can only change things from within the system. The advent of bloggers was different, and now that has become big business too.

But I also think, for the most part, they too wanted a way in…
That's the difference. We didn't want a way into the system. All we wanted to do was go to the beach and take pictures! It was such a different time. I suppose people now enter into all of this wanting it to be their career.

And yet you went to America, embraced the fashion system, and you still live there today…
Meeting Liz Tilberis, who was editing

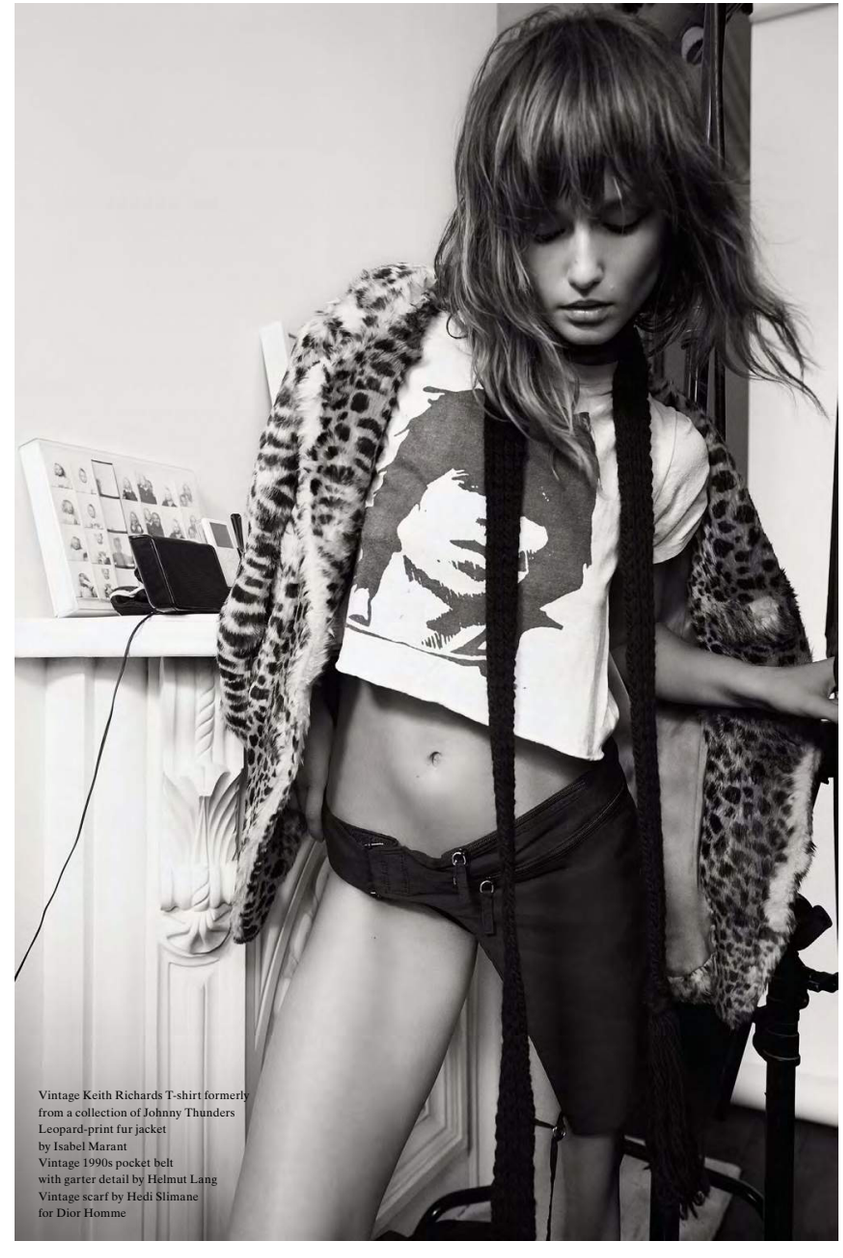
Harper's Bazaar at the time felt right, again it was a gut decision. She had been the bad girl at British *Vogue* and she really wanted me to be the bad girl at *Bazaar*. I suppose I am so quintessentially British, European I guess. I definitely am a European living in America. I hate to generalise, it's sort of crass, but I feel there are certain areas where people embrace newness in America. There is openness to newness; it is embraced with enthusiasm. As Brits we might go into things a little deeper at times, but there is also more cynicism. We're more guarded.

Was being at a big American publication a shock to your British sensibilities at first?
When I first started at *Harper's Bazaar*, some designers would literally put on a second show for us with models in the looks. That is the power of one of those big, American publications. I remember gripping the table, about to fall over in my heels. I'd be so tired. It's like an assault course going to the shows. I remember I was in Italy once, about on my way to a Nicolas Ghesquière show for Callaghan I think. It was at a time when Italy was full of squat toilets, and I desperately needed to pee. I remember I was wearing a pair of red Yves Saint Laurent heels and red socks. I went to one of these toilets, and I remember I managed to pee on my socks – I was sat in the front row with pee all over my socks! It was so absurd.

You have a long history working with designers. But the quintessential working relationship you had for many of us is that one you shared with Helmut Lang.
Helmut used to call me the nicest pit bull he ever met. If I feel something I can't let it go! I have not seen him for years now. We have very different lives. But I definitely think it was a prolific time. It was a definite moment.

Which do you prefer, working with designers on collections and shows or making images?
I like all of it. I wouldn't just want to do one or the other. I like working on images and with designers, making clothes, the whole lot. I thrive more by doing more than one thing. Brand building interests me; it is pivotal at the moment. Again, it is brands essentially knowing what they are and knowing how to define that. I want to work on more of that.

Do you ever feel nostalgic for the way things were in the early days of your career?
In those days, what was going on editorially was inspiring designers in their work. I might have been making a weird pair of sleeping-bag shorts for Emma Balfour to wear or some sort of denim cloak to be photographed by Dave. But nowadays, as a stylist or an editor, it is far more limiting. Sometimes you are just deciding if it is a side parting or a centre parting. With the nature of advertising, people are not necessarily looking for a point of view from the stylist; they are looking for you to shoot look number 17. Saying that, I don't know whether I am nostalgic for the past, I don't necessarily want it to repeat. I've been there and done it, and I want to do something new now. I am still insatiably curious and I love to challenge myself.



Vintage Keith Richards T-shirt formerly from a collection of Johnny Thunders
Leopard-print fur jacket by Isabel Marant
Vintage 1990s pocket belt with garter detail by Helmut Lang
Vintage scarf by Hedi Slimane for Dior Homme

Vintage 1970s blazer by Saint Laurent Rive Gauche
White military shirt by Balmain
Vintage skinny black leather tie
Vintage customised 1980s
leather skirt by Claude Montana
White ankle socks by The Sock Man
Black suede pumps by Manolo Blahnik

Vintage early-1990s tailored
jumpsuit by John Galliano

Vintage early-2000s punched-leather, strap-detail dress and bra by Helmut Lang

Vintage 1970s feather-detail cape
Vintage leather shorts
Studded belt by Saint Laurent
Vintage early-2000s over-the-knee
boots with lace detail by Helmut Lang

Vintage sailor pants
with suspender detail by Versace Couture
Vintage 1980s chain-mail T-shirt
Vintage over-the-knee boots by Helmut Lang
Chain-mail bandanas by Versace

Vintage 1970s gown (customised with
horse-hair shoulder details) by Donald Brooks
Vintage T-shirt by Hedi Slimane for Dior Homme
Vintage bracelet by Cartier
Vintage over-the-knee boots by Helmut Lang

Vintage early-2000s silk smoking suit and
silk tulle bra top by Helmut Lang

Gold blazer by Balmain
Vintage sequin striped top
by Saint Laurent Rive Gauche
Vintage 1980s black-denim miniskirt
White ankle socks by The Sock Man

Vintage early-2000s knit,
strappy top and bra
by Helmut Lang
Leather perfecto jacket
by BLK DNM
Knickers by Eres

Vintage 1990s silk-organza
shoulder sling by Helmut Lang
Grey jeans by Acne

Vintage 1970s Moroccan coat
by Saint Laurent Rive Gauche

Vintage 1970s evening jersey top
and skirt by Saint Laurent Rive Gauche

Model: Andreea Diaconu@ IMG. Hair: Shay Ashual c/o Tim Howard Management. Make-up: Wendy Rowe c/o Tim Howard Management. Manicure: Yuko Tsuchihashi for Chanel Beauté. Photo Assistants: Lance Cheshire & Doug Bruce. Digital Technician: Aron Norman. Lighting Technician: Jack Webb. Equipment Technician: Braulio Moz. Stylist Assistant: Courtney Kryston. Make-up Assistant: Aliana Lopez. Hair Assistants: Taichi & Saito Tsuyoshi. Tailor: Hwa Park. Props: Louise Hinnen c/o The Factory.

Vintage early-2000s jersey
cardigan, miniskirt (customised
with goat-hair fringe),
shearling-trimmed wedges
and bandana bra top
all by Helmut Lang

‘He loved all women. And women loved him too.’

Hubert Woroniecki on filming his first boss, the legendary Elite Model Management founder, John Casablancas.

John Casablancas didn’t just love models. He loved all women. And women loved him too. Why wouldn’t they? He was an extremely charming man: good-looking, clever, funny, educated and polite. He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Luck was on his side.

Running a model agency and leading a so-called playboy lifestyle happened by accident for John. I mean, the guy didn’t even know what a model was when he was 20. He just wanted fun, freedom and to be around women. John being John, he got all three and turned them into a pioneering business that changed the modelling industry forever. Like I said: he was lucky.

I first met him when I was a teenager. My family would spend summer holidays in Ibiza, and as it happened, so would John Casablancas. He owned a house just down the road from ours. The first time I was told that a guy who ran a model agency was coming over for dinner with a bunch of models – including his then girlfriend Stephanie Seymour – well, I arranged to stay in that evening. As a kid, I remember thinking he was such a fun guy, someone you’d *want* to share your holidays with.

A few years later, when I was doing my MBA at Université Paris-Dauphine, I had to partake in the annual ritual of the summer internship. They’d inevitably be boring office

jobs at one of the big banks, but one summer, John's partners Gérald Marie and Alain Kittler called up to offer me an internship at Elite Model Management in Paris. This became my introduction to the fashion industry, and the first time I'd witnessed the business behind the man in Ibiza. It was pretty well paid, too. This was much better than the bank.

But despite the seductive world of models and the fashion industry, my real dream had always been to make films. I'd grown up obsessed by the work of Kieslowski and Polanski and had an urge to attend film school.

But after business school, I drifted back into the fashion industry, and when John called me with the offer of a full-time job as a booker for Elite in New York, I agreed to go for one year. Unsurprisingly, I ended up staying longer – from 1993 to 1997. During those four years, Elite was *the* model agency: we were making three times more than any of the competition, and in one year our girls featured on nine out of the 12 monthly covers of American *Vogue*. Apart from Kate Moss and Claudia Schiffer, we represented *all* the supermodels. Which was to be expected, since it was John Casablancas who'd created the supermodel in the first place.

Contrary to popular belief, John hadn't always dreamt of running a model agency. His thing was marketing and promotion. By the time he was about 22, he'd already become a marketing manager for Coca Cola in Brazil. He loved coming up with innovative ways to market and promote things, and that meant models too. Elite was the first agency to use model 'books' and composites. He was also the first agency owner to work with models of broader ethnic backgrounds at a time when they weren't represented in the fashion industry.

Although we shared an office, I didn't see much of John during those years: he was never on the booking table; he wasn't even in New York that much because he was taking care of Elite as a business, as a brand, as an international agency. Nonetheless, those times we'd see one another and have dinner, he'd always be friendly and tender – like an uncle. The fact that he'd known me since I was a kid made a difference.

After four years though, it was time for me to move on. I left New York to attend the Polish National Film School in Łódz and completely lost touch with John. My previous life as a model booker and my new one as a filmmaker seemed at odds. Yet I'd always wanted to make a film about the modelling industry; I'd seen first hand what it was like and knew that nothing of any interest or quality existed about it in film.

One day though, I saw the Robert Evans film, *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, which opened my eyes to what could be done in documentary storytelling. I thought it was fantastic: Evans narrates his own story, and you get a genuine insider's point of view of what Hollywood was like in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. It immediately struck me that a film about John could be just as fascinating – here was a man whose playboy lifestyle was the stuff of legend, and who could capture some real insight into the modelling industry.

I contacted John, and he answered back very quickly: 'Sure, let's do it.'

Just like when I was at Elite, John trusted me to do whatever I felt was best for the project. He originally recorded a four-hour narrative in a New York studio, which I slowly got down to an hour and ten minutes for the film.

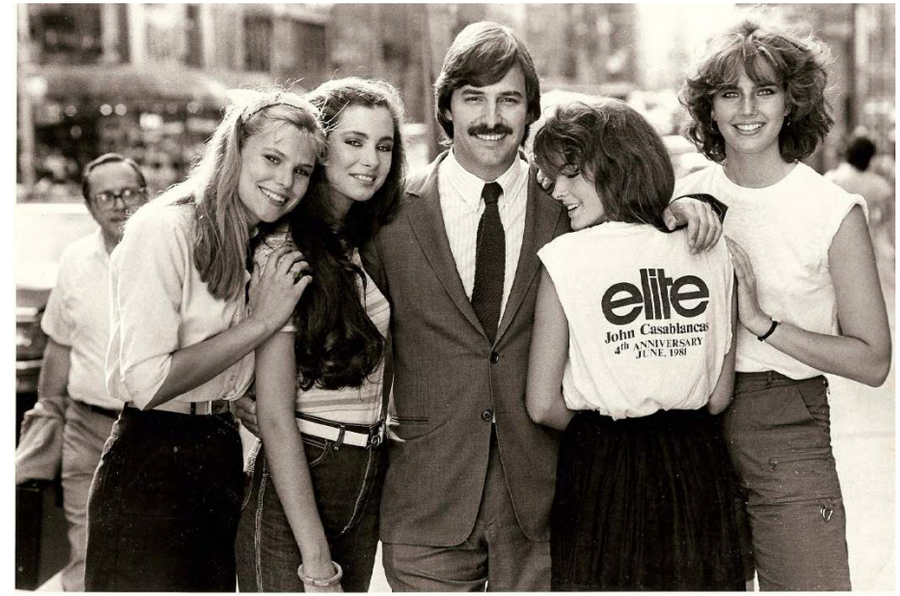
When I first thought about the project, I imagined interviewing other people like Gérald and Alain or Linda Evangelista and Naomi Campbell – just to give them a *droit de réponse*. But what could they say in a sentence or two that would bring something to John's story? The film is a documentary, but it sits between documentary and fiction. After all, John's was a dream life.

The film is a documentary, but it sits between documentary and fiction. After all, John's was a dream life.

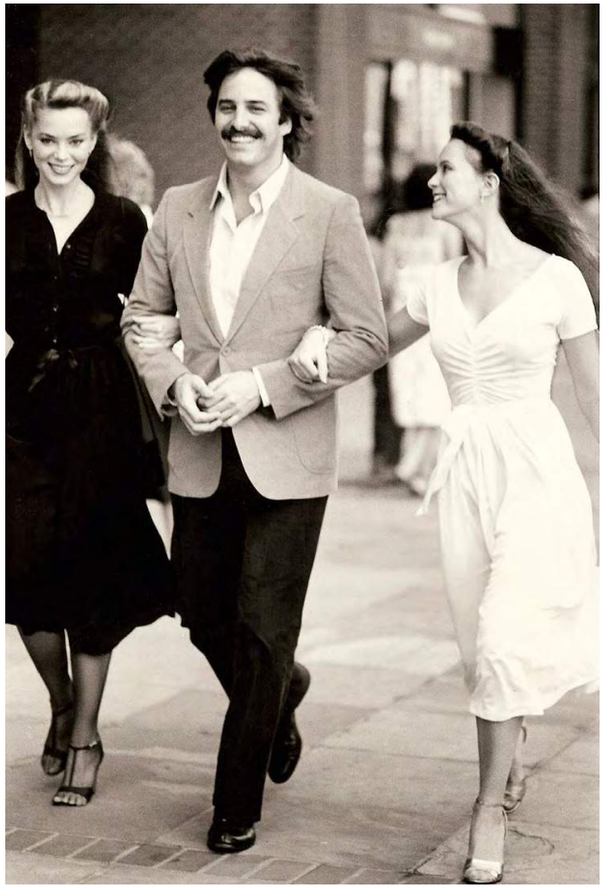
When *System* asked me to interview John in the summer, we tried speaking a couple of times, but it was clear that he was too ill to participate. He'd already had throat cancer 12 years previously, but he got very sick again in June 2012. He fought it as much as he could – he flew all around the world trying to find a cure – because he was someone who absolutely loved life. Two weeks after our last conversation, he passed away.

Back in January this year, I'd flown to John's home in Rio to show him the first cut of the film. I was keen to get his thoughts, to get his blessing. He liked what I'd done with his story, and the only thing he asked was to make sure it didn't hurt his wife Aline or his family.

The film is now nearly completed, and with a bit of luck it'll be released next year. When I look at parts of it now, I still get such a strong feeling about this larger than life man, John Casablancas. Hearing his voice tell the story is really moving to me. Like he's still there. As a filmmaker, that's all you can hope to achieve.



"I've been approached many times over the past years by people wanting to tell the story of my life. I wasn't sure that the subject, although perhaps amusing, deserved so much attention. It's not false modesty; it's just depending on how I look back at it, my life seems at times full and exciting or merely futile and superficial. Was it successful and filled with adventure? Definitely. Does it add up to something full and meaningful? That I really don't know. Nothing I've done has changed the world, but by God I've had fun doing it!"



"I lost my virginity at the age of 15 on a summer night in 1958 in Cannes on the French Riviera. I was a very lucky boy. Most of my friends had terrible first experiences with hookers or ugly girls in awful places at the end of long drunken nights. I had an illuminating first experience. At the end of the summer, I went back to school a changed man. I was destined to fall in love very passionately and very regularly."

'*Cher Monsieur,*
Votre fils a couché avec la bonne! Votre fils a trahi la confiance que nous placions en lui; il a trahi tout le monde ici! Nous ne souhaitons plus entendre parler de lui. Toutes nos lettres de recommendation sont annulées immédiatement.'
– Letter from Le Rosey School

"I'm always amused when someone says:
'Your job is so easy. All you do is surround
yourself with beautiful women.'"

"It was an unexpected profession, accidental and wonderful. It was a profession that allowed me to hold in my arms a number of women of such incredible beauty that most men could not even dare to dream it."

Courtesy of John Casablancas Estate

"Everyone has an interesting story, you just have to know how to tell it. I've had a fantastic life: a life of ups and downs, of exciting moments and depressing ones. And, I've been very lucky – lucky because the mediocrity of the business and my competitors made me look like a genius."

'Hot $$$exy Jeremy.'

Carlyne Cerf de Dudzeele's pick of the season.

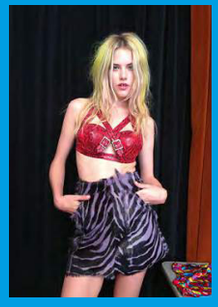
"Love, love, love Jeremy Scott.
Energy, Fun, Street, Happy,
Hip Hop, $$$exy, Brilliant.
Totally obsessed by it... hot, hot, hot!!!
C'est tout ce que j'aime!!!

Shot with my iPhone / icarlyne@icloud.
It's quick, it's fun and it's done!

New World
No Retouching, No Assistant,
No Budget, No Brainstorming,
No Moodboard
Heaven!!!

XXX CCD"

Photographs & styling by Carlyne Cerf de Dudzeele



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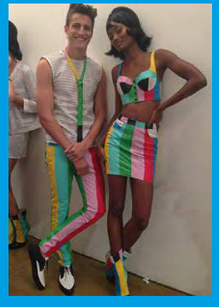

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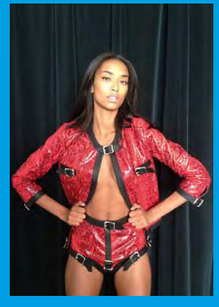
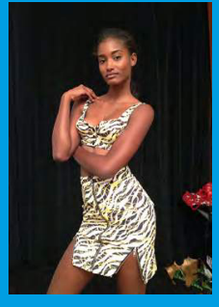

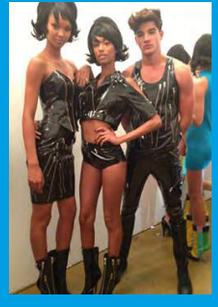
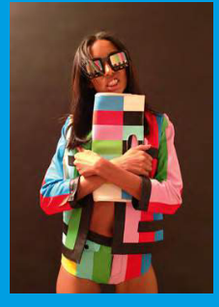

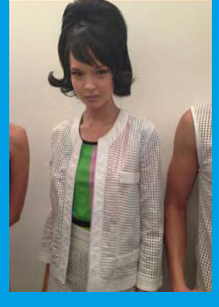

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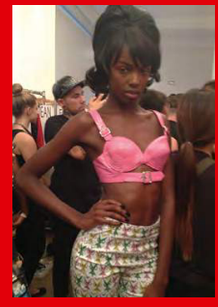
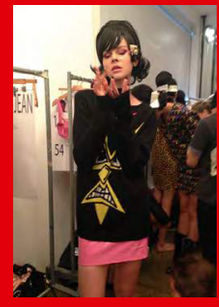
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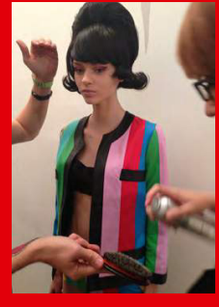


I'M A MESS

‘Nobody actually *needs* another fragrance…’

Estée Lauder’s Véronique Gabai-Pinsky on why fashion needs fragrance.

By Martin Brandtner
Portrait by Brigitte Lacombe

Véronique Gabai-Pinsky

Fragrance has been the core of Véronique Gabai-Pinsky's professional life for the past 20 years. French-born Gabai-Pinsky is president of Estée Lauder's designer-fragrance division and is responsible for the global business for the Aramis, Lab Series Skincare for Men, Coach, Tommy Hilfiger Toiletries, Donna Karan Cosmetics, Michael Kors Beauty, Kiton, Ermenegildo Zegna, Marni and Tory Burch brands. As part of her responsibilities, she also looks after BeautyBank and IdeaBank, the entrepreneurial think tank divisions of The Estée Lauder Companies with a mission to identify global opportunities for product development, diversification and regional expansion, bringing these concepts and brands to market through sustainable and profitable business models. As the world's foremost interpreter of a brand's identity into fragrance, Gabai-Pinsky knows more than most about the relationship between the fragrance industry and fashion houses, and the way a fashion brand can be brought into the lucrative world of fragrance. We wanted to talk to her about this most delicate of all brand extensions; and if when designers choose to move into this market, they are motivated by more than the potential profits; how she identifies the spirit of a fashion house in order to find a fragrance that can sum up and translate that into the memory-laden world of scent; and her extraordinary career which saw her start in France, breakthrough with Armani fragrances and subsequent move to the US. Most of all, we wanted to find out how she fell in love with the fragrance business.

I have so many questions to ask you, but perhaps we should begin with your career – your background and how you broke into the industry.

My journey was very interesting because I really didn't know I wanted to do fragrance. It happened a bit by chance, and in life it's good when things happen to you by chance. I started at L'Oréal in cosmetics, but I was then asked to move into the fragrance category to work on Cacharel. I fell in love with fragrance! I was doing my marketing job during the day, and in the late hours I would train myself to smell because I felt it was important to understand all aspects of the product to be a good marketer. I was lucky enough that the owner of a very important fragrance house took an interest in helping me develop that aspect of my product knowledge. Having someone senior mentoring me, coaching me and taking an interest in developing my career was very instrumental, as it helped me understand what you had to do to be a good manager above and beyond being a good business manager, as well as giving me the passion for the product itself. I think that the passion was fused at a young age through very senior leaders who showed me it was not only about numbers but it was also about the love for the product itself. As I moved through the ranks of L'Oréal and in spite of my young age, I was given an unbelievable opportunity by senior management to try to reinvigorate Giorgio Armani, which was troubled at the time, in 1994.

You were talking about your mentors. Who were they?

My boss at the time was Annette Louit, who was the general manager of Cacharel. But the person who *really* helped me was the owner of Givaudan at that time who was called Mr Jean Amic. I was really helped a lot by a perfumer in Jean Amic's team who was called Jean Guichard. I will forever be grateful to them. My second boss, George Klarsfeld pulled me off the Cacharel team and asked me to work on Giorgio Armani. And I wasn't even 30 at the time: I think I was 28. It was quite amazing that I was given tons of responsibility at a young age. Being young helps you to see things in another light – without necessarily seeing all the risks. So basically you just go for it, and you're dumb enough to not see the pitfalls. When you need to think differently, not seeing the potential pitfalls is a very important thing.

I have a question directly related to what you were talking about in regards to taking risks. In those days, would you consider that L'Oréal was a company that would be risk-inclined? It's interesting to hear that maybe Klarsfeld was taking those risks or was a different kind of guy.

Yes. Klarsfeld really was somebody. Today, the companies that are the strongest in the world are formidable companies – the Estée Lauders or the L'Oréals. And they evolve. They have moments when they take risks on a category and a little less on another; they try new things on one and not the other. At that time it was not a big risk because the Giorgio Armani fragrances was a small brand. It's not the same to take a risk on a small brand as it is taking a risk on what generates the livelihood of the company. So risks are taken where they need to be taken. And honestly, at that time I was too young to be able to understand the full complexity of the company's strategy. But I was given this mission, and I went for it. It was a great time and it resulted in an extraordinary experience and extraordinary results. I want to say that I don't think it's only based on risk taking because it's not true. There's a lot of luck in the business we're in. There's a philosophy in how you create products and develop brands which differs from company to company. But clearly there's also an element of chance that exists as well. I always say to my team that our business is 30 per cent brain power, the strategic understanding of the market place and the objective you have; 30 per cent the passion you put into it; 30 per cent muscle because if you don't execute it well it's not going to work; and then 10 per cent chance.

Let's go back to Armani. When you started working for Armani how much earlier had they begun doing fragrances?

Oh, a long time – at least ten years before.

Can you tell me the story about *Acqua di Giò*, and how that came about?

I think that what happened with *Acqua di Giò* was that it connected Giorgio Armani as a brand to the world of fragrance – and what fragrance means. Let me tell you what I believe fragrance is and what fashion is, and maybe you'll understand why this connection is so important because the psychological effects of the two categories are very different. If you want to be successful in bringing fragrance to a designer, you have to connect the dots which many people usually have a hard time doing. What we did at the time was to bring Giorgio Armani, a brand based on the search for perfection and quality with a kind of rigour, into an emotional platform that would be relevant but still connected to the world of fragrance. The way that we did it with their existing fragrance called *Giò* was to describe the spirit of Giorgio Armani in a moment of relaxation. We renamed it *Acqua di Giò* and took the source of inspiration of Pantelleria – the getaway of Mr Armani – and tried to understand why it was so beautiful and powerful. That was honestly the source of inspiration for *Acqua di Giò*.

Giò is the nickname of Giorgio. So the idea here was to bring it to a place where you just have water, air and sun, to an island of relaxation hence cutting the name. You scrape off a little bit of the social aspects of your life to go back to the essence of things. That's how *Acqua di Giò* was born. The idea behind doing this was to help the brand get to an emotional platform where people could project themselves onto the product in an emotional way. The reason it was so successful is because the fragrance is extraordinary, and it was a disruption to the marketplace in the current universe of men's fragrances; that's where the risk was taken if you will. We brought to them an element of femininity or sensibility by doing a floral fragrance with a touch of fruit and watery notes which did not exist at the time in that field.

When the project was put together and shown to Mr Armani and the people at L'Oréal, did they have an immediate understanding of the potential of this incredible mix: a new fragrance, new imagery, a new concept?

It was a big project for the company. We needed it to be successful and supported it, but nobody imagined at the beginning of the lifecycle of the brand that it was going to be mega successful. You can never imagine. You can avoid disaster in your field, but you cannot predict success to that level. It was a great surprise for everybody, but it was a surprise built over a couple of years. It was the juice – what we call perfume in the fragrance industry – that created the amazing sustainability of the brand. People fell in love with it and bought it again and again.

An interesting point here is that the first time you buy a fragrance you buy it mostly because of the concept: the design and the image. You're attracted to the brand by what you call the 'marketing mix'. The second, third, and forth time you buy a fragrance – and what keeps a business sustainable – is because you love the juice. Everybody was taken by surprise at the beginning because the appeal was so great.

***Acqua di Giò*'s visuals were ground breaking at the time and probably played an important part in kickstarting its huge success. How did it happen?**

I wanted to bring Armani into a world of emotional content that would connect with the fragrance. This idea of being at one with nature is something that's very important for the fragrance but at the

> 'You can never imagine. You can avoid disaster in your field, but you cannot predict success to that level.'

> 'It was the juice that created the amazing sustainability of the brand. People fell in love with the juice and bought it again and again.'

same time suited to the brand because of Pantelleria, where Mr Armani was relaxing. Sea, air and sun are all things we can relate to when we speak about the notion of escape. It's the moment when you feel the most relaxed, at one with the elements, that gives you a sense of well-being. That was the concept – your body connecting with those elements. Then when you present that to a talent like Herb Ritts you will have very strong and beautiful expression of that idea.

The visuals are an important part of connecting all of the dots and communicating what lies beneath the surface of a brand and a fragrance. The inspirations for them will come from culture, literature, architecture. Sometimes it's a place; like in the case of *Acqua di Giò*, it was Pantelleria. For the next Zegna launch, *Uomo* by Zegna, it's also a location – Casa Malaparte in Capri. If you know the story of Casa Malaparte, it really makes sense for Zegna. Curzio Malaparte built this house on the top of a cliff where it would be impossible to access unless you came through a tiny mountain path or by sea. The whole house is a set of stairs, and he built it to remind himself of his time in prison (he was imprisoned by Mussolini when he wrote some of his most beautiful pieces of literature). When he was released, he wanted to find that feeling of isolation again, to remind himself of his individual willpower against the odds of life – that's why I felt it was the perfect location for this campaign. Zegna is really the archetypal expression of masculinity. Men measure themselves by their accomplishments, so when you ask a man: 'Who are you?' he tells you what he has done. This idea of masculinity and the idea of the step-by-step establishment to create one's own masculinity and destiny suited this story and this house perfectly.

Let's talk more about the relationship and distinction between fragrance and fashion.

When you think of what fragrance is, it is a very emotional and personal – very intimate – product. It's your signature and can be a way to build your own confidence. For many people, it's the last touch. People also use it as a tool for seduction. And the difference is very clear when you choose what fragrance you use at the office to what fragrance you use when you go on a date. To a certain extent, it's also a tool for escape: you spray something, and you're transported somewhere else. It's very emotional. It's linked to your own set of memories. The sense of smell is the only sense that is located in the reptilian brain and not in the cognitive brain. All of the other senses are cognitive. So that's why it's so primal; it connects to your most primal elements. You cannot describe fragrance or what it does to you. There's a language for visuals, a language for music, but no language for fragrance. It really is something that's hard to express. And it expresses who you are in a strange way.

Now fashion on the other hand is an expression of creativity. A designer creates a fashion collection to express a message to the world. Someone wears those clothes to send a message about themselves to the world. So it's an intellectual process, not a primal need or sensation. The challenge when you work on a fragrance for a designer is how to connect their stylistic expression to what really motivates that expression and where it comes from on an emotional platform. When you look at a fashion collection, it's an expression – one which might change from season to season – but it's the unique vision of one designer which comes from one emotional place. When we work on fragrance, we have to 'dive deep' into their vision, beyond the current collections, to really understand what the wider motivations are for that creative expression, how they perceive the world. I'm not interested in the collection of the day per se because it doesn't help build a fragrance; but why this designer is doing this type of collection – that's what helps us build a fragrance.

> 'You have to address it at a primal level of what fragrance does and then the cultural aspect of acceptance of what you're wearing.'

Sexuality seems to have a lot to do with the world of fragrance. Fragrance plays a significant role in our primitive reptilian brain because it is intensely linked to sexual attraction and potential. Both fashion and fragrance seem to be linked at their core idea of seduction on a very primitive level.

There is truth to your analysis that sexuality lies at the core of fragrance, but it's not just about sexuality. Fragrance is connected to your primal needs – a sense of danger, the necessity for survival and the desire to find shelter. Memories are also very significant and fragrance can be a way to connect you to things around you as well as emotions and memories. So, the range of fragrance expression is much more than just a tool for seduction. You can explore the idea of escape, of memories, of comfort, of shelter or going back to a time or place. If you look at what Mugler did with his signature fragrance, *Angel*, it's amazing. It was never about sex but about childhood memories.

There are certain brands that lend themselves quite easily to being translated into fragrance because what they're about is fairly essential and easy to understand – they can be summed up in a few words. But then, there are other brands – huge luxury brands – which have struggled to translate their success in fashion into fragrance. In your opinion why is that?

Our role is to find a way to take the vision and the personality of the designer and build something that will resonate. Marni is a smaller-scale fashion brand – a trendsetter and trend-leader – with an edge that drives what happens elsewhere in the industry. Marni expresses Consuelo's vision of modern femininity, which is not linked to the traditional archetype of women. It's not linked to seduction but more to the creative expression of each individual. For her, the traditional models of femininity are obsolete. So how do you take that and translate it into fragrance? For us we knew we couldn't go the traditional route of femininity – we had to remove all the flower notes, all the fruit notes and give Marni something that would meet Consuelo's vision, and yet be a beautiful women's fragrance that will be really lovely to wear. We ended up using wood and spices which are usually used in the male field of fragrance and the scent of a rose to wrap it up. The rose is filled with incense, so it was not the traditional female rose scent. It is a gorgeous fragrance and a new way to look at women's fragrance – it disrupted the market because of that. We realised we couldn't launch it the way we would launch a traditional fragrance. We needed it to find its public. So we decided to go for a limited distribution to really cultivate and roll out the distribution little by little. When you work with a designer who has such a different point of view, you need a creative direction that fits the unique point of view as well as align it with the business model that will allow you to be successful.

So you're building something that is tailor-made both in terms of a way it's expressed as a fragrance but also as a business. It makes sense because you're not trying to stretch a brand beyond a limit where it wouldn't make sense for that brand. You're also not putting pressure on projects by expecting them to be immediately in the top five fragrances. What are your ambitions for Marni?

> 'It's not the same to take a risk on a small brand as it is taking a risk on what generates the livelihood of the company.'

The ambition for Marni is to be in the top five of every door we are in. That's the way we are looking at it, roll out slowly but in every door we are, we want to be in the top five. You're absolutely right though, you cannot apply the same commercial pressures to certain brands that you could apply for others.

What do you think the differences are between beauty ideals in different markets?

They are very different; they have common threads but also specific preferences. There are real differences and also cultural differences. An Asian woman has a very different olfactive taste from that of a Middle Eastern woman. In the Middle East, they love deep, rich, woody, spicy fragrances – that's part of the culture. In Asia, they prefer fresher, light scents. You need to know the olfactive preferences between the different global markets when you develop fragrances for designers. If you want to be successful in Europe, you need to steer a little towards European taste. We study the differences a lot. An American, French or German woman will describe the same fragrance with very different words. If they all like the fragrance no matter if it's fresh or woody, a French woman will describe it as sensual. If a German woman like the same fragrance, she's going to say it's sporty and elegant. And if the American likes it, she'll say it's fresh and clean. Regardless of the note. So you have the real olfactive preferences which you have to know and then there is the psychological way of describing what you like is what you also have to know when you develop a fragrance. This is very interesting because you might not see that in the fashion world. But in the fragrance world, because there is no set language you have to address it at a primal level of what fragrance does and then the cultural aspect of acceptance of what you're wearing.

You mentioned the importance of choosing the right art directors, photographers and talents to communicate the fragrance – you've been quite passionate about giving chances to a lot of young talent. You gave Fabien Baron

his first beauty campaign on *Acqua di Giò* for women with Diane Kruger and then worked with him on the iconic campaign for the male fragrance, for example. Is there anyone else that you've worked closely with or whose career you've helped launch?
I was given opportunities when I was very young, and if it hadn't been for that, perhaps I would not be where I am today. I think it's important to explore talent, and I believe it's part of my role to help talent emerge. Because we're in a world where you have 1,100 launches a year, you need to differentiate yourself creatively – you need to stand out. You need to thrill the consumer in order to create desire. I say to my team all the time that good is simply not good enough. And sometimes working with the same people gives you a repetition of the same creative expression – it's human. So sometimes it makes sense to work with the established and then sometimes you need to give chances to new talents who approach the project very differently. I also want to help young people because I think they have a lot to give, and if nobody helps them, then how will they be able to? I'm also always looking to find new creative expression; I do believe that there are people in the industry whose points of view have not altered over the years. There's a freshness in young talent that is quite amazing. Everyone uses fragrance of course, but the bulk of our consumer base is 18-35 years old. Maybe because it's a tool for seduction. [*Laughs*] So having people of the same generation communicating these ideas also really helps.

Who would your dream collaboration be with?
Andy Warhol.

You would have made a good perfume together. Do you think there are fashion houses with which you think it's virtually impossible to do fragrance? Or can you always find a way to make even the most complex, sophisticated, twisted and bizarre language into something visceral and appealing to a general audience?
There are brands that are easier than others for sure, but I think there is always a way. There is always potential. When it comes to accessory brands or technology brands, that's when it becomes more complicated as it's less to do with the body. Sports brands can also be a little bit more complicated. You just have to approach them a different way. For example if a brand is rooted in a certain market, you can use the cultural background to develop its meaning. In Europe, brands tend to be about aesthetics, the individual and introspection. Whereas American brands tend to be more about the future, a hope or vision for the future. For a French brand, for example, you can more easily explore the mysterious sides of your soul; it makes sense, the '*Je pense, donc je suis*.'

I would imagine it when you take on a new brand at Estée Lauder, you analyse whether the brand will be promising commercially and what amount of business it will add to your company. When you look at the brand, can you immediately understand the commercial potential it could have in the fragrance category of that brand regardless off the *chiffres d'affaires*?
You look at different things. Firstly, you look at the size of the business because the size of the business gives the understanding of what the current awareness of the brand is. You look at the potential of the brand and your estimation of what that potential is. Again, it's not all about today but about the next ten years. And then you add the complexity and emotional values of the brand as well as the persona behind the brand that could help you build a very successful business.

Earlier on you said currently there are 1,100 launches per year; when you started there were probably a third or a quarter of that. How has the business evolved?
It's very interesting. The fragrance business has evolved dramatically. When I started, you might have had less than a hundred launches a year and a lifecycle of ten years. Ten years later, there may have been 250 launches per year, and now there are 1,100 launches per year – you're lucky if one of your launches sees the next Christmas. Today, it has become more challenging. And to be successful you have to be true to certain values and know what you want to achieve with each of the projects that you're taking on. From a business point of view, you have to be very clear with what your objectives are, where you want to be successful, in what region and in what type of model. Then you have to say: 'Good is simply not good enough.' It's a simple sentence, but it drives a lot of our activity. You have to make sure that you commit to quality because if you want to be on sale for the next couple of years, and if you don't offer the best quality, you have no chance. If you want to emerge from the plethora of launches, then you have to be creative, to offer something that touches the consumer in a meaningful way – whether or not it's disruptive. We are not in the business of answering a need but of creating a want; nobody needs another fragrance. We need to create that feeling of, 'Oh my God! I have to have it!' for a greater chance of success.

Going back to that short sequence, you said you're lucky if your fragrance is around the next Christmas? The lifespan of a contemporary perfume can be so short. Do you think it's possible with all of the new and existing fragrances on the market for a new big fragrance to emerge today, something that will really last and be successful in the same way was as *Acqua di Giò*?
There's always room for a new *Acqua di Giò* or a new *Be Delicious* by DKNY. DKNY's *Be Delicious* was created ten years ago, and every year its sales have grown. It's from one of the most successful brands from a fashion standpoint. Maybe it doesn't have as much heritage and history to reference as some other luxury houses, but the fragrance itself continues to find its public because it makes a lot of sense for the consumer and they connect with it emotionally.

Still, that was ten years ago. Could you do that today?
Yes, of course. Otherwise I wouldn't be doing what I do today if I didn't think you could make a difference and build for the long term. We start every project with that in mind. We are unlike our competition – we have a much better understanding of how to create a balance between our products, sustaining them, nurturing them and the consumer. The honest truth is that we will only launch a fragrance if it's relevant to the brand and meaningful to the consumer. If you don't have that then there's already way too much in this marketplace to add to the noise. You want to add a symphony to the world, that's what we're trying to do. If we feel it's not so creative or different to what's on the market, we're not going to launch it. It's a difficult decision to make as there is also a business attached to it, but at the end of the day you need to take pride in the work you do and feel in your gut that what you have created is beautiful. With regards to the success rate, some will work, some will not. From a business point of view, you have to know how to manage that – it's risk management. Sometimes you're successful, sometimes you're not.

Someone in the fragrance industry once told me that making perfumes was like producing films. You have to put so much energy into the narrative and the visuals. You then launch it to the audience, and you have to stay quiet and see what happens. What do you think about this analogy? It's like taking a leap of faith.
Well it's a very good analogy. Like with the movie business or any business, you have to manage your risk and there are ways to manage risks. You build your business model according to the level of risk you want to take or you don't want to take. You don't take global risks. You manage regions, and you manage the portfolio. But you're absolutely right, it's a leap of faith. What you can do from a development and creative standpoint is to give yourself the best chances of being successful and avoiding disaster. The better the quality of the product, the better chances you have – regardless of whether you're going for a full global launch, entry prestige or super high-end. Quality is first and foremost. You have to manage the artistic expression with the business orientation – and create a balance between the intuition, instinct and business management – it's not all about market research but about a gut feeling – if you don't have that, then the chances are you have a problem. The fragrance business is halfway between fashion and consumer goods. You have to balance the rational side of the consumer goods business – which is very intellectual and business-orientated – with the level of creativity and desire which you see in the fashion industry. It's what I love about this business.

'In fragrance, you have 1,100 launches a year. You need to thrill the consumer in order to create desire – you need to stand out.'

'You have to balance the rational side of the consumer goods business with the creativity you see in the fashion industry.'

‘I prefer shooting ads over editorial pages.’

Victor Skrebneski, fashioning the face of Estée Lauder.

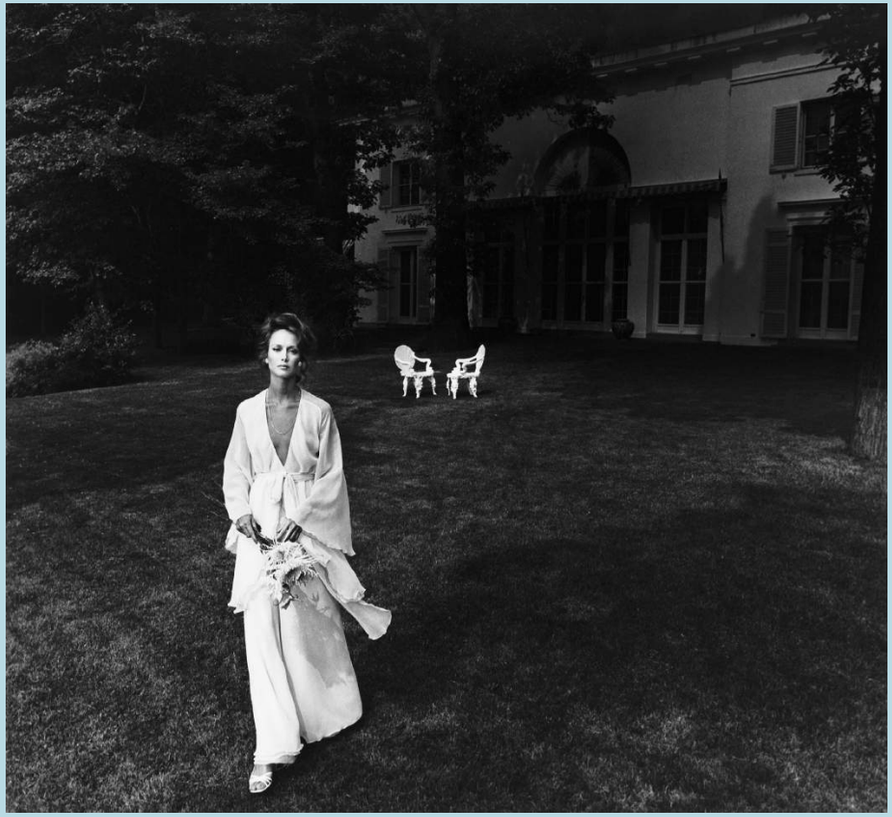
by Alex Aubry

Suga, Alvin Chereskin,
Victor Skrebneski, & Karen Graham.
New York Studio, 7 April 1977.

Phyllis Connor
Evening dress by Phillipe Tournaye
Victor Skrebneski's Chicago Home, 1962.

Karen Harris
Lake Forest, 1969.

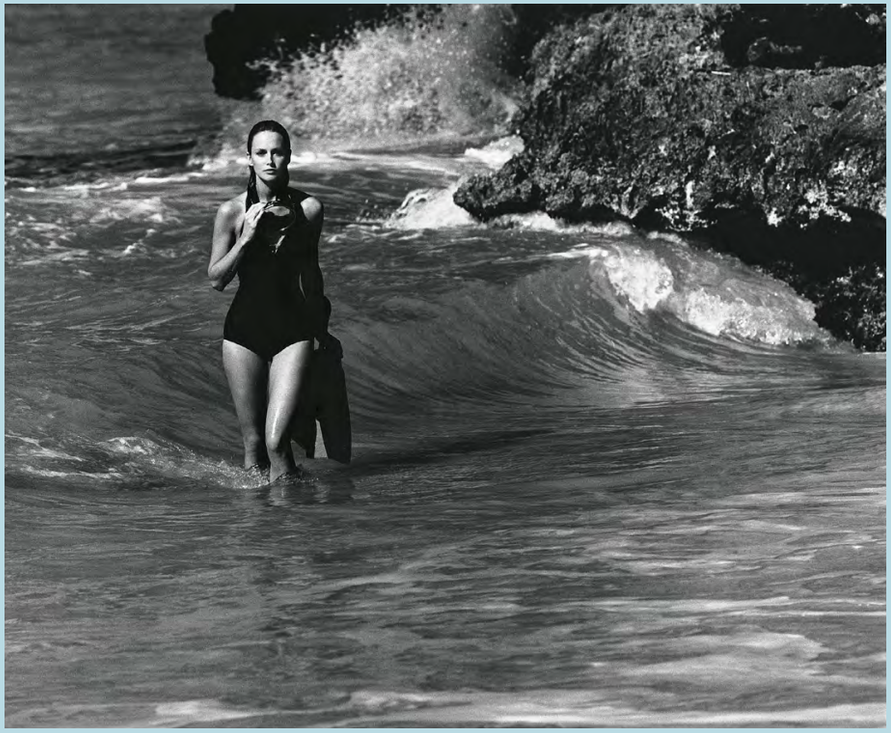
Karen Graham
New York, 1970.



Karen Graham
Evening dress by Stephen Burrows
Hamptons, 1973.

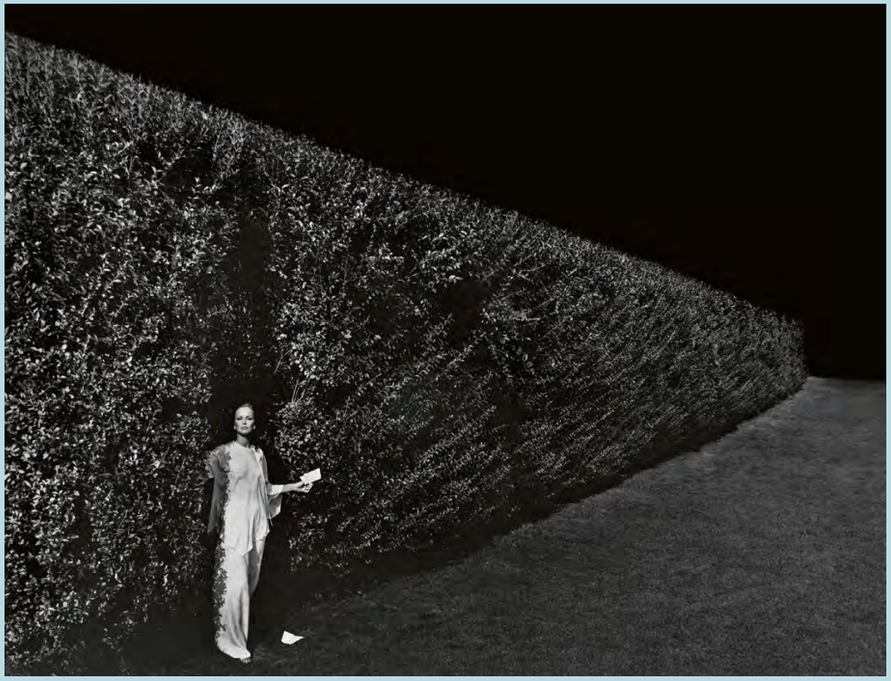
Karen Graham
Dress by John Anthony
Jamaica, 1973.

Karen Graham
Central Park, New York, 1973.



Karen Graham
Jamaica, 1973.

Karen Graham
Montauk, 1976.



Karen Graham
Evening dress by Holly Harp
Hamptons, 1976.

Karen Graham
Evening dress by Tracy Mills
Venice, 1980.

Karen Graham
Evening dress by Frank Massandrea
New Orleans, 1981.

Willow Bay
Dress by Vicky Tiel
Linda Dresdner Boutique, New York, 1985.

Estée Lauder's advertising campaigns were always about more than selling her beauty products. She once proclaimed that they chronicled not just standards of beauty, but also trends in fashion, movements in interior design and changes in lifestyle. Communicating more than just powder and paint, today the beauty company's portfolio of advertising campaigns shot by the legendary photographer Victor Skrebneski between 1962-1989 have acquired a life of their own.

Lauder once described his work as 'peerless', and long before the term 'lifestyle branding' crept into fashion's lexicon, Victor Skrebneski was crafting seductive worlds through his photographs, capturing an ephemeral sense of luxury – perfect for selling everything from tweed blazers to bottles of perfume. For over 60 years, he has used his expert lens to capture fashion's mood swings and our evolving notions of beauty.

As legend has it, Skrebneski found his passion early in life – literally. At the age of six, he found a lost camera on a Chicago park bench. It changed the course of his life. 'I didn't even know what it was. It was just this black box,' he recalled. 'My father would take my sister and I to this park every day, and I took the black box to the people in the field house. A couple of weeks later, when no one had claimed it, they said I could have it.' That simple fold-out camera launched Skrebneski on a journey that would transform the Chicago native into one of the world's most prolific fashion, beauty and portrait photographers, earning him a place in history amongst the likes of Irving Penn, Richard Avedon and Robert Mapplethorpe.

Like them, his atmospheric black-and-white images have appeared in prestigious publications such as *Vogue*. Similarly, he has helped launch the modelling careers of iconic faces such as Wilhelmina and Cindy Crawford, while his unguarded and intimate celebrity portraits include a menagerie of cultural icons from Liza Minnelli to Andy Warhol – in the celebrated 'black turtleneck series'. This prolific body of work has earned Skrebneski respect as both a photographer and artist through countless awards, books and museum retrospectives. This autumn, Skrebneski was honoured with the prestigious Lucie Award at New York's Carnegie Hall, for his contributions to the field of photography.

Born in Chicago in 1929 to parents of Russian and Polish heritage, Skrebneski studied painting and sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago, but, as he recalls: 'The Art Institute was boring because I knew how to paint. Nothing to it.' He had a stint at the Moholy-Nagy Institute of Art and Design in Chicago, but he found his metier when a friend gave him his darkroom equipment, and Skrebneski went to work enlarging and cropping the photographs he had been taking since he was a child.

His introduction to the fashion world began in the early 1950s. After showing his photographs to Harry Callahan, who taught photography at Chicago's Institute of Design, he was urged to show his work to a number of New York editors, telling him he had never seen cropping like his before, and soon Skrebneski was shooting for magazines such as *Glamour* and *Esquire*.

Shortly after returning to Chicago to pack and move permanently to New York, the then 23-year-old received the first of many assignments from Marshall Field's department store. 'Marshall Field's kept pouring out the photographs that I was doing, so I figured, I'm going to do the same thing out in New York, so why not just stay here? And that's what I did,' says Skrebneski, who established his Chicago studio in 1952. Although most publications credited with making a fashion photographer's career are based in New York, Skrebneski flourished in Chicago. And by attracting the attention of influential tastemakers, instead New York began to come to him, and he was soon shuttling between the world's fashion capitals. 'Victor is a Chicago boy who never left home but became a citizen of the world through the medium of his art,' noted Frank Zachary, *Town & Country's* influential Editor-in-Chief from 1972-1991. 'Impeccably composed, immaculately rendered, the Skrebneski photograph is his universal passport.'

If his name isn't familiar to some, his work certainly is, for despite his recognition as an artist, Skrebneski doesn't shy away from fashion's more commercial pursuits. An accomplished image-maker, he has been called upon to shoot some of the most memorable ad campaigns of the past 60 years. Many have come across his patrician portraits in Ralph Lauren's stores or his *Chanel No. 5* ads featuring Carole Bouquet, all Parisian cool and elegance as she stares back from the pages of magazines and billboards.

'I prefer shooting ads over editorial pages,' says Skrebneski recalling disagreements with editors when it came to laying out his images. 'Now if I shoot fashion stories or editorials, it's because I want to see my work the way I shot it. I don't need anybody to crop my photographs for me.'

Skrebneski's penchant for storytelling through imagery was at its most potent during his time as Estée Lauder's exclusive photographer, a 32-year collaboration during which he worked with only six models: Phyllis Connor (1962-67), Karen Harris (1967-1970), Karen Graham (1970-1980), Shaun Casey (1981-1985), Willow Bay (1985-1987), and Paulina Porizkova (1988-1993). The result is a portfolio of timeless images that defined the tastes and aspirations of generations of women across America and the world.

At his LaSalle Street home and studio in Chicago, a former coach house where Skrebneski has lived and worked for over 60 years, the walls are lined with iconic photos of the fashionable and notorious who posed for him. Amongst the framed images is one of close friend Hubert de Givenchy with his muse Audrey Hepburn, while another of Iman and David Bowie was taken shortly before their wedding. Long considered a Chicago icon, the street outside bears a sign that reads *Victor Skrebneski Way*, while inside, seated at a desk in his studio, the photographer pours over a decade's worth of images shot for Estée Lauder's ad campaigns. A glamorous Karen Graham dressed for evening in a stately living room and wearing *Private Collection*, or sitting languidly on a terrace in *White Linen*, waiting for tea to be served.

Insisting his images should speak for themselves, Skrebneski is not about to pause and take stock of his oeuvre; he is notoriously reticent when it comes to discussing his work, let alone his tenure at Estée Lauder. 'I'm a photographer. I don't usually talk about the way I work,' confides Skrebneski. 'It's an intuitive process. A photograph is a mood, capturing an event or how you feel at a particular moment in time.' His method of working is entirely conducted on his terms, and he has a reputation for being a perfectionist amongst editors, art directors, models and anyone else he encounters.

Recalling his first meeting with Mrs Lauder at the company's Fifth Avenue headquarters, Skrebneski says, 'She was very sweet and nice to me.' Ironically Skrebneski never met Lauder in her oft-photographed 40th floor office with its ornate desk, Champagne-coloured sofa, lush carpet in the right shade of *Lauder blue* and countless framed pictures of her with Princess Grace of Monaco, the Duchess of Windsor, Prince Charles and Princess Diana; it was the perfect backdrop for many a PR image. 'The office I met her in was simpler and smaller. I guess that's where she worked,' notes Skrebneski.

'This is the picture that launched my career with Estée Lauder,' adds the photographer, pointing to an image of a model with broomstick Elizabeth Taylor eyelashes, outlined pale lips and a neat chignon. This photo landed on Lauder's desk when she was searching for a face to cast in her first ad campaign. The face in question belonged to Phyllis Connor, a Chicago-based model whom Skrebneski had discovered. 'It was originally supposed to be an ad for Marshall Field's. Estée Lauder took one look at it and said, "That is the face of Estee Lauder,"' says Skrebneski, who also noted Phyllis Connor's talent for instinctively knowing what he wanted to project in an image. 'One doesn't find models like that any more. She gave a lot to the camera and could move her fingers ever so slightly to bring emotion to a photograph.'

At a time when cosmetics companies used different advertising agencies to produce campaigns for each country they sold in, Estée Lauder made the decision to maintain a single global image when she launched her first campaign in 1962. Consistency was essential in the visuals and this became Skrebneski's responsibility. More revolutionary was the company's decision to use the same model in its advertising photography over a run of several years. 'Our competitors used many models to speak for them. We felt that there was what we came to call the *Estée Lauder woman*,' recalled Lauder. Over the course of several decades a handful of women would be called upon to personify the founder's ideal of elegance,

Long before the term 'lifestyle branding' crept into fashion's lexicon, Victor Skrebneski was crafting seductive worlds through his photographs.

The Estée Lauder woman was Caucasian, slender, blessed with elegant swan neck, soaring cheekbones and classically proportioned facial features.

and although each face projected a different kind of physical beauty, they had much in common: Caucasian women, slender but not excessively thin, blessed with elegant swan necks, soaring cheekbones and classically proportioned facial features.

The ads were a reflection of Mrs Lauder's own idea of a woman of taste and sophistication. 'I didn't need a tiger woman to sell lipsticks,' she once noted. 'My women are too fine and, more important, too smart to be taken in by crudeness. My women are elegant achievers. They are independent.' Over the decades, her campaigns came to embody a feminist manifesto – the models are never dehumanised or objectified. Whether selling a tube of lipstick or a jar of night cream, the photos never focused on just eyes or a mouth to the exclusion of the whole face, the Estée Lauder woman was always depicted as a whole woman displaying a characteristic expression of cool don't-mess-with-me reserve.

She was a woman Lauder described as being 'in charge of her life, which was perceived as a good life by millions of women who identified with her and strove to be like her. She could be a career woman or a homemaker, but whichever she chose she was successful. And she had a certain indefinable air of class.' In Skrebneski, Lauder found an equally talented myth maker to conjure up this ideal woman. 'Estée Lauder was a master at myth-making and a great marketer, and she wanted to convey this genteel aristocratic world,' says the photographer. His ad campaigns came to personify the fiction the brand wanted to project.

Pulling out one of the first photographs he shot of Karen Graham in 1970 standing by a marble staircase, Skrebneski notes that it was one of Lauder's favourite pictures of the model, 'because there was a dignity and elegance to it that captured her vision of what the Estée Lauder woman should be.' To achieve the distinctive Lauder look – an aura of imperturbable elegance and monied know-how – Skrebneski spent the better part of three decades working with a team that included Alvin Chereskin, the President and Creative Director of Lauder's advertising agency, AC & R, June Leaman, Senior Vice-President of Creative Marketing at Estée Lauder, and the noted Japanese hairstylist Yusuke Suga.

Owing more than a nod to cinematic lighting effects and film-still poses, Skrebneski's preference for black-and-white photography can be traced back to his childhood. 'When I was a kid my father would take me to see black-and-white films by Jean Cocteau at the World Playhouse Theater. I was raised on them, so I don't think of colour as being immediate. I don't think of colour as being real.' On close observation Skrebneski's photos reveal subtle narratives, inviting the viewer into the subject's world. One atmospheric 1976 shot of Karen Graham standing in a field overlooking the ocean resembles a moody Scottish pastoral scene. 'This was actually taken in Montauk, though it could have been in Scotland. It was only later, after the shoot, that we found out the house in the background belonged to Richard Avedon,' confides Skrebneski.

Even those with little interest in Estée Lauder's cosmetics or its skincare line will find it hard to mistake the message in the company's advertising. Representing more than a product, it's a world filled with seductive illusions of what it's like to have good taste and the old money to pay for it. 'Two months ahead of a shoot, we start pulling it all together. We have location finders, a hairstylist, make-up artist, model, photographer, photographer's assistant, fashion stylist, publicist and art directors, in all about 15 people to carry out these shoots four to six times a year,' recalled June Leaman in an interview. 'June would usually come up with the locations,' noted Skrebneski. 'She would say, "I want to do Venice this year!" And a location scout would find the places for us to shoot in. But prior to the actual day of the shoot, we didn't have a theme or a specific idea in mind for a photograph. It would all come together instinctively.'

Whether the setting was a sumptuous private home in New Orleans or the Greenwich Village studio Skrebneski once maintained, rails of designer dresses were inevitably called in from the likes of Oscar de la Renta, Halston and Valentino, in addition to a remarkable assortment of accessories and interior design details. The backgrounds of the ads were so craftily assembled that over the years the cosmetic company received thousands of letters and phone calls from individuals interested in acquiring a piece of the elegance: a table cloth, a sofa or an Oriental vase. 'Those photographs caused a lot of public comment. People were interested in everything in the picture,' says Skrebneski. 'The designers whose dresses were shown did quite a lot of business, and I was always being asked where we had got hold of an item of decoration.'

A lesser-known fact about the photographer is that he is also a designer. For Estée Lauder, Skrebneski was happy to decorate his sets with Chinese vases, Pablo Picasso ceramics and well-stocked bookshelves. Since Lauder aimed its products at higher-income women, the ads had to project an aura of luxury. Whether shooting in a Venetian Palazzo or an Upper East Side townhouse, the photographer would always include various props such as dolls, horses, and curiously, in a 1981 ad featuring Karen Graham, a framed photograph of Nicholas II, the last tsar of Russia. 'I love to design photographs, to consider the proportions of the figure, the space around it, the edge of the picture,' says the photographer, whose carefully choreographed interiors also helped his models get into character. 'When you're trying to project an image of classic elegance, all those beautiful settings fed right into the persona I was working towards,' noted Karen Graham.

Skrebneski admits that what surrounds him in his daily life shapes the way he takes pictures. Not surprisingly, he arranges possessions in his home as carefully as he arranges an advert. Climbing the concrete staircase to the spacious apartment above his studio, he points to a 17th-century Italian wood figure standing in the hall. 'I bought this at a gallery in New York from Andy Warhol in the early 1960s,' he explains. 'I think he was working there back when he was still illustrating shoes for Bonwit Teller.' Skrebneski takes an intuitive approach to decorating, noting that 'beautiful things work well together.' His instincts dictate where things should go. His home – which has been used as a backdrop for his portraits – is an ultra chic, modernist space furnished with a mix of exquisite 18th-century French furniture, Cubist art, a bronze by Max Ernst, a sculpture by Man Ray, floating on gleaming travertine marble floors.

The success of Skrebneski's photographs can be attributed to the close relationships he formed with his models. Karen Graham, whose 15-year contract with Estée Lauder became one of the longest working relationships with a model and beauty company, played her role as the Lauder woman so convincingly that over the years people unfamiliar with the fashion and modelling world assumed she was Estée Lauder – a misconception the real Mrs Lauder did nothing to dispel. 'She really gave to the camera, and you were able to feel the emotion in her eyes. I think that is a very rare trait to find in models today,' notes Skrebneski of Graham's ability to channel emotion like a silent movie star. 'She always knew what to do without me even telling her,' he adds holding up his favourite image of the model shot inside a house in Jamaica.

Almost two decades have passed since the photographer shot an ad for Estée Lauder, yet there is still much to be learnt about beauty and style from Skrebneski's photographs, perhaps the most important lesson of which is that youth does not hold a monopoly on beauty. Many an Estée Lauder model continued to pose for the company well into their thirties thanks to the photographer's encouragement. To Skrebneski, a woman is never too old to be beautiful or photographed, and he scoffs at the use of teenage models in fashion publications and runway shows. 'You can't expect 15 or 16-year-old girls to understand that they're wearing something elegant, or what elegance is, unless they are great students of history, and read and enjoy books,' observes the photographer. It was that very ingredient of *knowing* that infused Estée Lauder's classic beauties with depth and character.

In 1999, the photographer reunited with Karen Graham to shoot an ad campaign for Estée Lauder's *Resilience Lift* face cream, aimed at mature women. Of her decision to return to modelling, Graham, who was 54 at the time, noted: 'It's insulting when products for someone my age are modelled by 17 year olds. You don't have to be flawless to be beautiful. Laugh lines are good.'

It is a sentiment shared by Victor, who, at 85, has no intention of resting on his laurels, continuing to expand his body of work: 'I think that life is too short to begin with, and I still have a lot that I want to do, so I'm always eager to move on to new projects. I enjoy doing it. That's all.'

Whether selling a tube of lipstick or a jar of night cream, the photos never focused on just eyes or a mouth to the exclusion of the whole face.

Karen Graham played her role as the Lauder woman so convincingly that people unfamiliar with fashion assumed she was Estée Lauder.

The American Questionnaire: Diane von Furstenberg

By Loïc Prigent

When and where was the last time you said to yourself: 'Wow this is the American Dream'?
As I am about to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the wrap dress, I cannot help but look back and be so thankful! I have indeed lived an American Dream and continue to live it.

What character trait do you love the most in Americans?
The best quality about America is its resiliency.

What was your best investment in America?
To live here, to have my family be born here…

How can you make *joie de vivre* happen in your American life?
Joie de vivre starts in your heart!

What scares you the most in America?
The guns… too many of them!

You did trunk shows in America back in the day; what did you learn about American women in the process?
I learnt everything about women, fashion, confidence… I still learn from women in my stores… I will never stop learning from watching women and establish intimacy with them.

What is the stylish effortless tip women should steal from American women?
I don't think American women are particularly effortless… this is why my products are successful. That is my contribution to them.

Where do you stand on the Miley Cyrus twerking scandal?
At first I hated it, then I saw her hosting Saturday Night Live and I loved her… She is 20! Let her enjoy it all.

In France they have a famous woman's bust to incarnate the Republic in all town halls. Who would be the perfect American woman to do the same thing in America apart from you?
Hillary Clinton, Gloria Steinem, Madonna, Marilyn Monroe, Jackie Kennedy… and many more.

What is the dream you had as a child that you have achieved?
To have become the woman I wanted to be… independent, free and on the go.

What is your new dream as an adult?
For my granddaughters to become the women they want to be.

Who are your favourite people to talk to in the fashion industry?
My fellow designers.

Who is your favourite model right now?
Daria!!!!!!!

I love that you kiss some people when you bow at the end of your shows. Who are you kissing and why?
It is a very nice moment because I can feel the love of people. I always kiss my husband and my children. I try to make as much eye contact as possible… I want to thank *everyone* for being there and supporting me.

Who is your favourite photographer of all time?
Irving Penn.

How does it feel to be on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine?
Pretty amazing… especially when you're 29!!

How American are you on a scale of 0 to 10?
5 American, 5 European. European education. American adulthood.

Photograph by Ara Gallant, 1981.